Taro Hitsuji
ILLUSTRATION BY
Kiyotaka Haimura
4
Last Round Arthurs
THE WEAKEST KNIGHT
&
THE EXCEPTIONAL ONE

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"Wait… Do you remember Nayuki?"
"Why, of course. I remember her just as well as you do."
Last Round Arthurs
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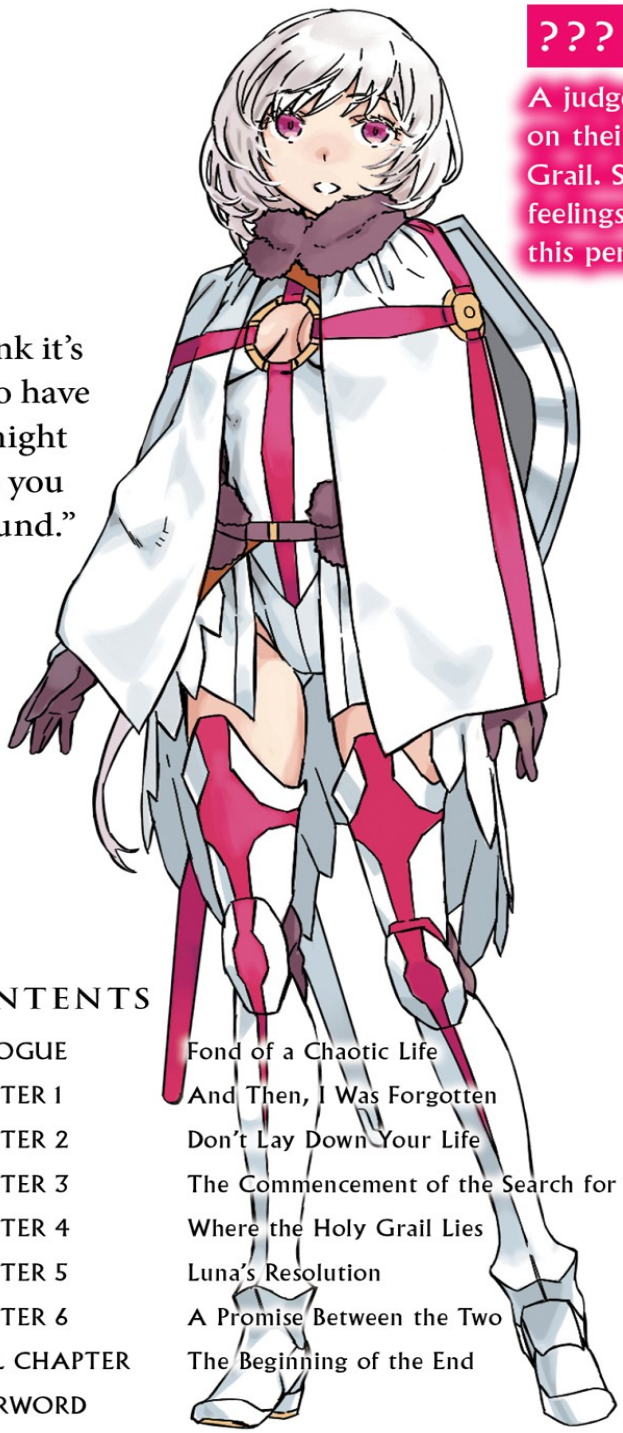
The Weakest Knight
&
The Exceptional One



"I think it's fine to have a knight like you around."

???

A judge who travels with them on their quest for the Holy Grail. Seems to have special feelings for Sir Kay. As for this person's identity...

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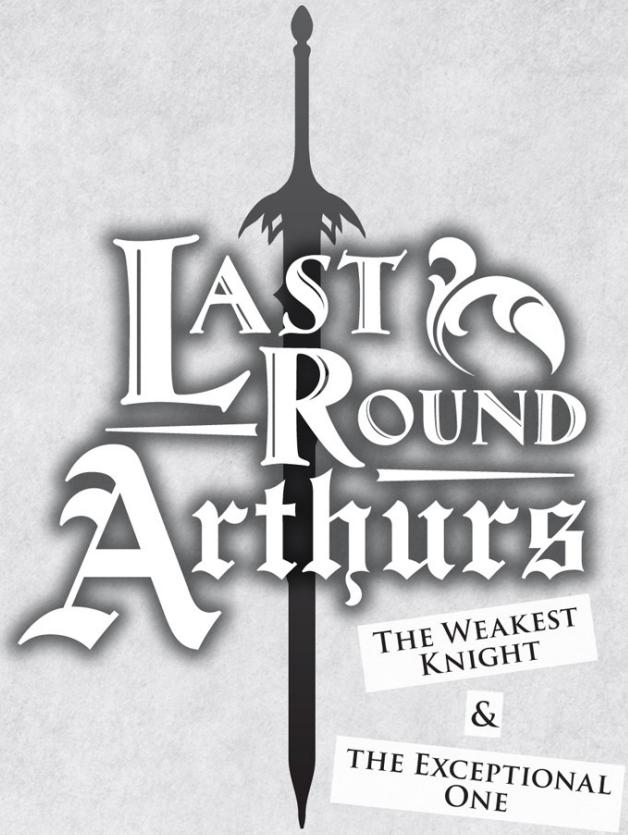
"He'll die! He has to! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"
VIVIAN
The head of the Dame du Lac, who has a grudge against Merlin. Suggests Rintarou obtains the Holy Grail to save Nayuki, but...
SIR LANCELOT
The Jack who serves Kujou. Raced through battlefields in the past for one particular woman, even as he and the country were falling to ruin.
"...If you don't mind me saying so, I think I understand your feelings."
"I'd team up with a witch to revolt against the world for a single woman... That's the type of man I am."
SOUMA GLORIA KUJOU
One of the King Arthur candidates Luna fought against. Leaves the succession battle and starts working on his own for the sake of the woman he loves.
LUNA ARTUR
A high school girl and candidate for King Arthur. Fundamentally horrible, but with a strong conviction. Always chooses the path of hardship in her effort to become the true King Arthur.
"Okay! Spit it out! I'll hear you out as your King!"
"Mmm-gh-mhm?!"
RINTAROU MAGAMI
A boy who is the reincarnation of Merlin. Feels responsible for Nayuki being wiped from the world. Wants to save her somehow.

"I can save the people who are important to you, too. I'll protect them for you… So don't believe in the Holy Grail… Believe in me."
"Lahat Chereb— the Flaming Sword!"
SIR KAY
The Jack who serves Luna. Shamed as the weakest knight of the round table. Holds fast to her pride as a knight, which causes her to do the unimaginable…



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Taro Hitsuji

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kiyotaka Haimura

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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Taro Hitsuji
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Cover art by Kiyotaka Haimura
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Over there is yesterday in all its radiance. Here is today, faded and colorless.

And tomorrow is bound in ashes.

We reached the dismal end of the play, of our dreams.

I watched it as the cold wind blew.

Yes, he was there among the Knights of the Round Table.

Together with the one they called strong, noble—the once and future king.

Be that as it may, their swords etched him into stone, disappearing into sand and verse.

Like a dream at dusk, like a mirage of a fleeting night.

I watched everything as I slumbered.

Watched as the cold wind blew.

John Sheep

FROM LAST ROUND ARTHUR

PROLOGUE

Fond of a Chaotic Life

“—When you reelect me, Luna Artur, as student council president, I promise you’ll all have the most wonderful time on campus!”

“WHOOOO-HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

At present, the grounds of Camelot International High School were buzzing with a strange energy. Someone had erected a stage in the dead center of the schoolyard, where a throng of students had packed in like sardines. Standing heroically in the center of the platform was Luna, armed with a microphone.

The questionable sash over her shoulder read: VOTE LUNA ARTUR FOR A BETTER, BOLDER, BRIGHTER ACADEMY. Her hoisted banner screamed, FOR AN HONEST, HONORABLE STUDENT COUNCIL. She was making a passionate speech that sounded more than a little phony.

“A vote for me is a vote for three-day weekends! A vote for no midterms! A vote to abolish school uniforms! I will make a media room where students can stop by to read manga and watch anime! I promise to double the budgets of every club and organization! Who’s more deserving of your vote than me?!”

“Yeeeah! I knew you had our backs, President Lunaaaaaaaa!”

“I’m shaking! I wish I could be you!”

“Another term for President Luna!”

The courtyard was crowded with Luna’s supporters…

“Oh please! That’s impossible!”

“Spare us the empty promises!”

“I wish you would keel over and die!”

…Meanwhile, the anti-Luna faction was about to burst in anger.

“And now, I’d like to hand over the mic to students who will give their endorsements! Up first…the person you’ve all been waiting for! Li’l Kay is in the house!”

“H-helloooo. ♥ I’m here to endorse Luna for president! It’s me—Camelot High’s permanent idol! ★ Li’l Kay! ★ ”

Barely covered in a glittering, frilly bikini, Sir Kay got up on stage.

The outfit accentuated her smooth, pale skin and curves. More scantily clad than usual, Sir Kay was flushed red in embarrassment, eyes wet from tears. She waved at the students below as if she’d just given up on resisting.

“WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOO-HOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

It was like the air was electric.

Luna strained her voice, refusing to be drowned out by the cheers.

“But wait! There’s more! It’s still my turn in this Battle Phase! Allow me to introduce a new face that will join Li’l Kay!”

“”””Wh-whaaaaaaat?!”””””

“A late bloomer and a rising star with popularity to rival Li’l Kay! Her pure and plucky looks are sure to capture your hearts! She’s a younger idol—one you’ll want to protect! Please give a warm welcome to Emma!”

“Uh, um…L-Luna…? Wh-wh-wh-why am I…?”

The event planners shoved Emma to the center of the stage. She was in a revealing maid outfit that was intentionally cute.

Unlike Sir Kay’s model physique, Emma didn’t have any curves to speak of and still had room to grow. There was something young and wide-eyed about her that made everyone want to protect the timid, squirrelly girl.

Showered in the stage lights, Emma started to fidget, tears wetting the corners of her eyes.

“Whoooooo-hooo!”

The air was charged with more energy at the appearance of the underclassman with a secret cult following.

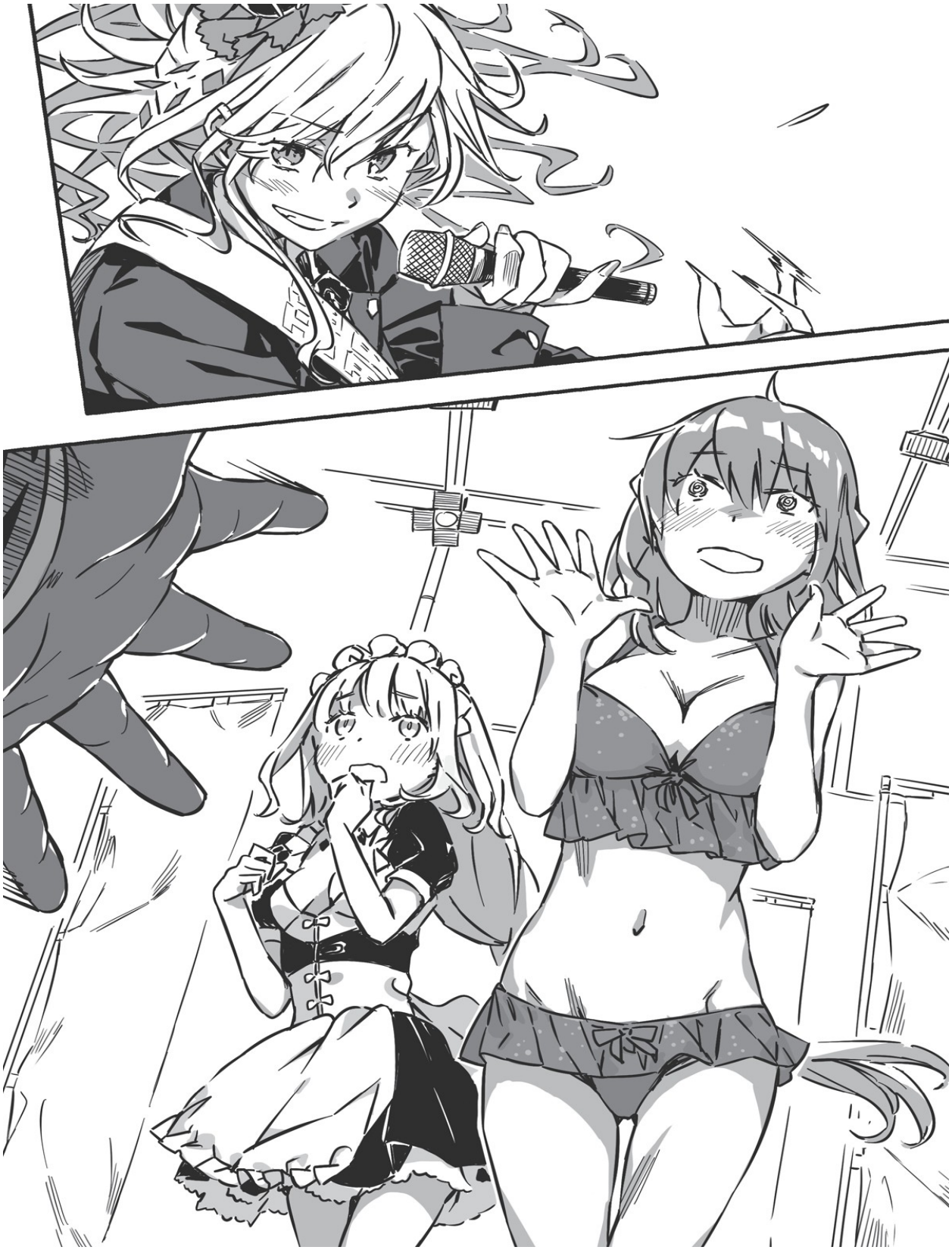
“I-I’m going to s-s-sing to show my support for Luna! ☆ This song is called ‘Fit to Be Our King’! Hope you like it!”

Sir Kay’s introduction cut to flirty pop music that came from nowhere. Colorful strobe lights pulsed on the stage.

“Aaaaah… Why… Why do we have to do this again?!”

“Desperate times, Emma. We’re already here. Let’s just get this over with. Ha-ha-ha-ha…”

For whatever bizarre reason, the campaign speech had turned into a concert for Sir Kay and Emma. As the two sang and danced themselves to death, the students basically began to mosh, losing themselves in the frenzy…



The student council was ready to strike while the iron was hot. They swooped in on the crowd, selling autographs, pictures, merchandise, and CDs of the new song on the sidelines.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?! This isn’t a campaign speech! Cease this activity at once!”

Led by Tsugumi Mimori, the Ethics Committee had been dispatched in full force.

“Shut up and keep out of this, Ethics Committee!”

“Don’t interrupt President Luna’s speech!”

“Like we’d allow a tyrannical organization to hold us down!”

Luna’s supporters were flying off their handles.

“Don’t you dare make fun of us!”

“We’ll overthrow the kingpin at this school—now!”

“This is war!”

The anti-Luna faction was just as hot-tempered.

Both parties collided head-on, and the Ethics Committee jumped in to stop them. A violent three-way scuffle ensued. It was pure pandemonium—hell on earth. They were letting their inextinguishable fury loose…

“Rintarou?! Where are you?! Give me a helping hand! Save your king—aaaaaaaah!”

“…What a disaster,” muttered Rintarou, facing this spectacle and sighing for the nth time since he’d entered this academy. He cradled his head in his hands.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha…” Nayuki let out a strained chuckle next to him.

CHAPTER 1

And Then, I Was Forgotten

“Heh… Well, that was a raging success!”

After literally every imaginable thing went wrong, all the presidential candidates had wrapped up their speeches. As soon as they stepped foot in the student council room, Luna had dared to declare her victory.

“You call *that* a success, Your Majesty?” Rintarou grumbled, facing a desktop computer and gripping the mouse with a gloomy expression. He was noiselessly working on something. “Can you point me to the part where we had even the *smallest* of wins? Spell it out for your stupid vassal, please…”

“Don’t you get it?! Making any impression is a good impression!” Luna thrust her finger right in front of Rintarou’s nose. “After all this, I imagine I’ll be the only thing in their little heads!”

“I think they’ve just about had their fill of you.”

“Heh-heh-heh! Did you see that?! The other poor candidates can’t touch me! None of them stood out, and I don’t think any of the students will be able to remember their names or faces!”

“I think *you’re* a little touched.”

“Plus, all their platforms were so unoriginal and self-serving: ‘Beautifying the campus’? ‘Setting up a suggestion box’? I can’t believe they think they stand a chance!”

“How are you going to keep your promises? Pledging to implement three-day weekends and abolish midterm tests might give you an advantage…but there’s no way you could actually make that happen.”

“You’re so stupid! I, Luna Artur, would never lie! I *will* make it happen… Watch me…! …But remember, I didn’t specify a timeline to those suckers. In other words…I have a decade…or two…to deliver on my promises…!”

“W-O-W.”

“I mean, politicians lie about their platforms every day! History hasn’t taught us anything. Shame on you if you’re fooled! So, no problem!”

“Let’s not even go there…”

“Plus, I imagine no one is brainless enough to vote for me for my *campaign*! The most important thing is to show them I can bring them a big spectacle! Don’t you get it?! They’re voting for my *potential*!”

“Well, I guess I get that, in theory…”

“If you get it, hurry up and finish your work! Chop-chop! Have you finished the posters I asked for?!”

Looking annoyed, Rintarou flicked his gaze back to the monitor. The image-editing software displayed an election poster with a photo of Luna.

Her image had been heavily edited, smoothed, and enhanced with his skills. Since she was already pretty, she looked like a goddess in this picture. In fact, she was 120 percent more beautiful than before.

In the photo, Luna was clad in a bathing suit, as if this were completely normal, flashing a sexy pose to make the pubescent boys go wild. She was weaponizing her looks for this poster—a calculated move.

"I guess it's too late for this, but are you sure you want to go this far…?"

Rintarou cringed as he looked at his hideous creation.

This nasty poster was like one of Michelangelo's masterpieces: something that transcended time and space to capture the souls of people. It was like an optical illusion, ready to suck in the viewer if presented the opportunity.

"Hey! That's pretty good! Not too shabby, Rintarou, for a work in progress!"

"What?! What else do you want me to do?!"

"Huh?! Are you totally clueless? Boobs—duh! Huge honkers! You might as well make 'em bigger!"

"Oh, come on! You've gotta be kidding! Since when are you a scam artist?!"

"Someone has got a big mouth! The bigger the boobs, the better, obviously! Boobs always win! Some like 'em small, others might like 'em perky, but most men love a huge rack—statistically speaking! It's the undeniable truth! Capisce? Now, get back to editing! I'm sure *you* can do it, Rintarou!"

"Uh, well…I guess…I can, but…"

"I trust you! I've got to go connect with the people! I think it's time for me to get on the good side of the girls, too! Okay, student council! Roll out and round up some hot guys!"

"""""Aye, aye!"""""

With Luna as their leader, the members marched out of the room like a stampede. The space was finally quiet.

"Aaaah…," Rintarou sighed, swiveling back to face the screen.

With his hand on the mouse, he started to work on editing Luna's chest.

Click-click-click… The room was silent save for his clicking mouse and the scratching of his pen as it slid across the tablet. He added a new layer over her boobs and got to work rendering.

"…"

The presidential election for the next term had been sprung on them, and Rintarou had found himself slowly dragged into the campaign, forced to participate in these incomprehensible activities.

Look at him now: Even if this was just a picture, he'd been reduced to fiddling with the chest of a female student and friend…

"What the hell am I even *doing*?!"

Crash! Rintarou flung the mouse at a wall, letting out his inner voice.

"Now, now, Rintarou. Calm down."

"That's right. Those who are short to wrath have a short path."

Felicia and Sir Gawain patted him on the back.

She was in their school uniform, and he was dressed in a suit.

"Wait… Why are *you* here?!"

"We used magic to create an illusion that we're a student and teacher at Camelot High and infiltrated this school," Felicia explained.

"That's right. At the request of your liege…Luna. It was a job for someone who could carry out their activities in secret without drawing anyone's attention. And who better than us?"

"…A request from Luna? …Huh. I guess she's not just some ditz. She comes in clutch when we need her." Rintarou smirked. "Seeing how things have gone, I was suspicious about *that*…about the chance that someone at this school is pulling the strings of the King Arthur Succession Battle… Huh. Luna must have asked you guys to investigate. I guess I was wrong—"

"Our role is to slink around the school, stealthily pull down the posters of the other candidates, and put up Luna's picture in their place!"

"It would be horrible if anyone witnesses us! We must accomplish this in secret!"

"—Fine! I was the idiot for thinking she's changed!" Rintarou wailed, clutching his head.

"Hee-hee-hee! Luna is so generous! She said she would reward us with a whole ten cents per poster removed!"

"That's right! With that, we can earn six dollars in a day! Which secures us a proper meal tonight, my liege!"

"Absolutely! Oh, bless you, Luna!"

"…Heh-heh-heh… Oh, that's weird… Why is the monitor all blurry?" Rintarou was trying to hold back his tears after seeing master and servant genuinely ecstatic in front of him.

"So we have to go fulfill her request!"

"It's a hard quest, but…we'll get the job done—as if our knighthood and kinghood depends on it!"

"Yes! Posthaste!"

Felicia and Sir Gawain charged out of the student council room in high spirits.

"Ahhhh…," Rintarou sighed, watching the two go from the corner of his eye.

Geez… We don't have time for this crap…

Alone in the room once more, Rintarou picked up his mouse and went back to work.

Click-click, it went, as he was lost in thought.

At the moment, the King Arthur Succession Battle was progressing on this man-made island of New Avalon. It would end with an enormous magical ceremony to revive King Arthur in the modern day. This was all to

prepare for the Catastrophe—the impending apocalypse that would end all humanity.

Luna was one of the eleven Kings participating in the battle for the throne, and Rintarou was advising her as a vassal. It had already been a month, which meant there had been some major developments.

Mr. Kujou and Sir Lancelot's faction had been crushed.

Emma and Sir Lamorak's group had been suppressed.

Hitoshi Kataoka and Sir Tristan had been subdued.

Reika Tsukuyomi and Sir Dinadan's faction had been driven away.

Who would have imagined Luna and Sir Kay—the weakest group at the beginning of the battle—would manage these life-and-death fights against the strongest candidates?

It was practically a miracle.

I'm not naive enough to think we're the only ones battling the Kings… I imagine others are fighting each other somewhere on this island… Maybe other factions have been eliminated…

Rintarou had requested the fairies living on the island collect information on his behalf. According to them, Ainz and Sir Bedivere had already dropped out after sustaining attacks from Hitoshi's faction.

Eleven Kings in total. We know four of them have been removed from battle, which means we have seven to go. Subtract our temporary ally, Felicia, and Reika, who's MIA, and we have five Kings left.

If they've been engaged in battle like us…we should have less than half of the Kings vying for the throne…

In which case, the succession battle would move on to the next phase.

The crux of this King Arthur Succession Battle was the quest for the four treasures.

King Arthur's four treasures are the Spade, Club, Diamond, and Heart—the Holy Sword, the Holy Spear, the Holy Stone, and the Holy Grail. The one who succeeds in obtaining all four will become the Last Round Arthur… In other words, the real fight is excavating these treasures and hijacking each other in the process…

Up until then, there hadn't been any sign of this quest beginning.

His best guess was that the number of participants had to sink below a certain threshold. He was very close to confirming his theory.

In other words, this was just the preliminaries. Now we'll start the real thing…with the announcement of the quest.

Moving forward, the fights would only intensify. After all, the four treasures were artifacts that concealed terrific powers. Having the advantage of a single one could be the difference between winning or losing.

As if they didn't have enough to think about, there seemed to be a witch scheming behind the scenes of this fight… And these suspicious antics were only increasing as the battle progressed.

Even if he tried, Rintarou couldn't predict the future.

We need to get serious…and figure out our next moves, in which we're careful but bold… One mistake could cost us our lives…

He clicked the mouse.

"…"

The monitor displayed Luna's poster, which he had just finished touching up.

He didn't realize her breasts had become so big. He could practically hear them go *boiiing* from the screen. The final edit was flawless—looking so natural, it was hard to believe it was edited.

Rintarou regarded his own work with half-closed eyes…

"What the hell am I doing…?"

…Eventually, he slammed his face onto the desk.

With no audience to hear him, he was stuck in a cycle of his own thoughts.

"Good job, Rintarou."

Someone set down a steaming cup of tea in front of his nose.

His eyes flicked up. "Nayuki?"

When had she come back?

Nayuki Fuyuse, the chief secretary of the student council, stood in front of him. She smiled gently.

"Ah-ha-ha. You look exhausted…"

"I *am* exhausted. Why is this *my* job…?" Rintarou pointed at the screen.

"…Uh… That's a whole lot of chest…," Nayuki observed, peeking at the image and flushing red. She smiled at him, looking troubled. "Um… I suppose…you like busty girls, Rintarou…?"

"What?!"

"Well, these things can reflect the preferences of the editor… Oh, that's too bad… I'm afraid I don't really have much to offer… Waah…" Nayuki pretended to sniffle.

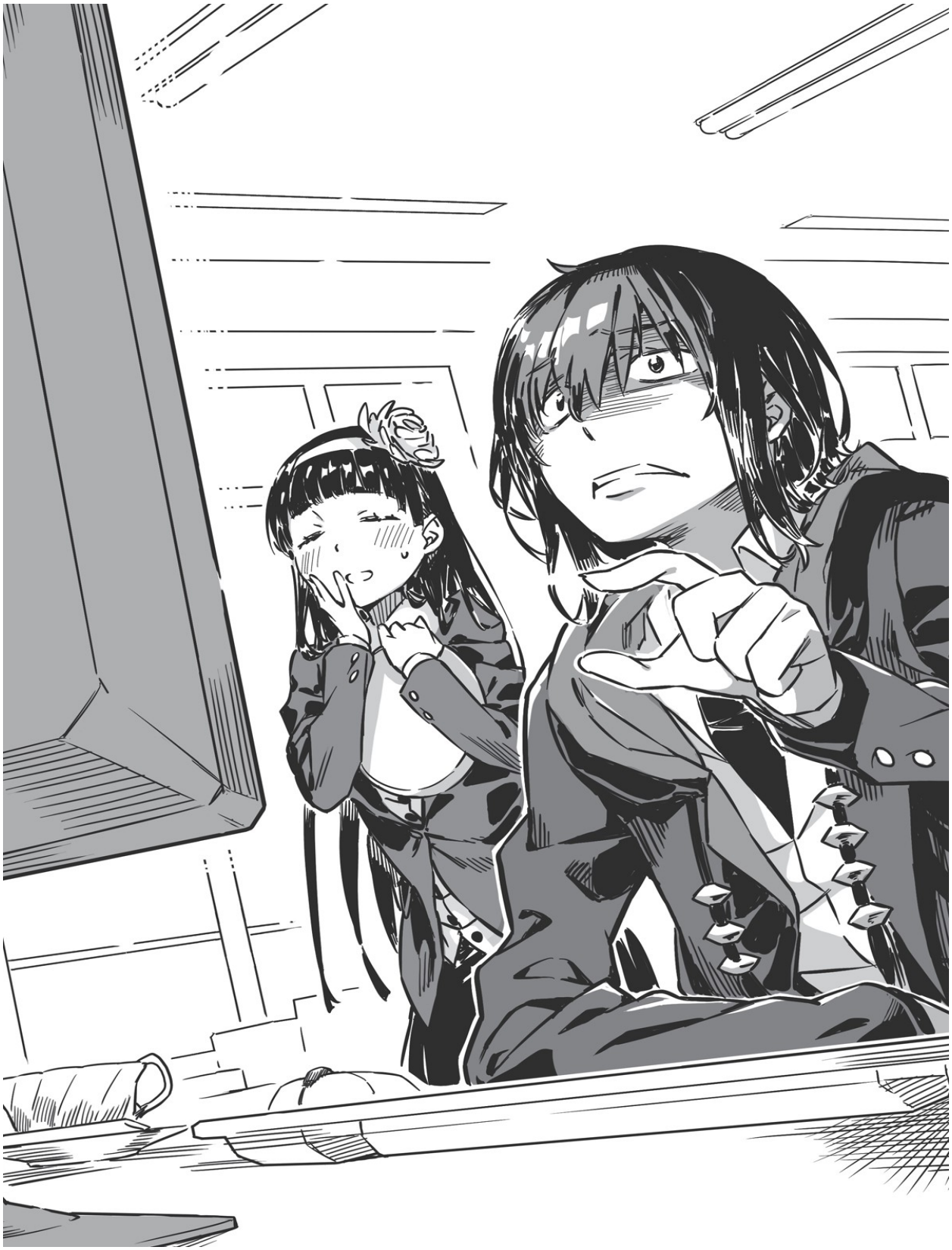
"Hoooold it! Let's quit the jokes! This was Luna's bidding! It's got nothing to do with me!"

As Rintarou desperately tried to make excuses for himself, Nayuki playfully stuck out her tongue at him.

Even though they'd only just met, they'd really warmed up to each other. Sometimes, it felt like they were old friends.

For some reason, Rintarou just got along with Nayuki.

"Anyway! Why am I stuck with the job of fiddling with digital boobs? Am I some filthy pervert? Dammit! I should be gathering information on the surviving factions! Or uncovering more intel on the treasure quests! There's other stuff I should be doing! Right?!"



“R-right…”

In reality, Nayuki Fuyuse had once been a member of the Dame du Lac, the group organizing the King Arthur Succession Battle. That meant she was a sorceress with unbelievable mana. In one of their battles, she’d weaponized these skills and combined them with her swordsmanship to lead Luna’s group to victory.

In fact, they owed their lives to Nayuki. She was the reason they could keep up their shenanigans.

“Ugh… Don’t you agree with me, Nayuki? Don’t you want Luna to take this stuff more seriously? If she keeps this up, she’s going to find herself six feet under…”

“Look at it from another angle. Luna can mess around because she knows she has you. I’m sure she has faith in you, Rintarou.”

“Give me a break… Think of the burden this places on my shoulders…” He tousled his hair, looking annoyed, though he didn’t seem all that unhappy. “Geez. Guess there’s no way around it. I’m the only one who can protect King Airhead…and it’s not like I could abandon her now. If she kicked the bucket, I wouldn’t be able to rest easy. Guess I’ve just got to look after her… Oh, well!”

“…” Nayuki’s eyes were distant as she watched him with a smile that seemed lonely. “Hee-hee, I’m glad to see you’ve been having fun lately, Rintarou,” she chirped.

“…Nayuki?”

There was something clearly different about the tone of her voice.

When he turned to meet her gaze, he found she was looking straight at him as though she was trying to appeal to him about something. He didn’t feel like Nayuki was teasing or joking around, just purely based on her behavior.

Rintarou was flustered in spite of himself…

“G-gimme a break. You think I’m enjoying this?”

Rintarou looked away, electing to crack a joke to defuse the strange air between them. “Nothing good has come out of joining her faction! She’s been abusing her power, forcing me to attend to her needs around the clock! Frankly, the succession battle isn’t the hardest part—it’s protecting her! Ugh, I should have never taken this job!”

“…”

“I might not look like it now, but everyone used to be scared of me, you know. That’s because I have powers beyond any human! Obviously, no one dared to step on my toes, because they were too busy whimpering in their boots!

“Now, people mistake me for Luna’s apprentice or something! And our classmates are cozying up with me! The student council doesn’t even bat an eye at foisting chores on me! All that gravitas…down the drain!

“My luck must have run out the moment Luna set her eyes on me!”

Rintarou aired out his grievances. Nayuki looked at him with a tender gaze.

“Rintarou… I think you’ll be fine without me.”

“…?”

“As long as you have Luna…I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

This wasn’t their normal banter.

Rintarou cocked his head to the side, questioning her strange behavior. “…Nayuki, what’s gotten into you today?”

“Huh? Oh…it’s nothing, really. Ah-ha-ha. Sorry for being so cryptic.”

She tried to laugh it off, but Rintarou wasn’t the type to let something go so easily.

“…No, sorry. I really am. You must still be bothered by the past, huh?” he said.

“!”

In the past, Rintarou had lashed out at Nayuki when he’d learned she had been part of the Dame du Lac. After all, he had once been Merlin, the oldest and strongest sorcerer in the world, and he’d been tricked into getting sealed away, dying at the hands of a certain member of her organization.

This bitter memory from his past life left a bad taste in his mouth about the Dame du Lac. It was hard to do justice to his utter disgust toward her organization with words.

“I-it’s not about that! I didn’t mind! I know you have a reason to hate us!” Nayuki denied it, shaking her head furiously. “Didn’t she betray you even though you trusted her? That’s so terrible… I bet you’ll never be able to forgive her…”

“I guess. But it was wrong to make an enemy out of the entire Dame du Lac for the tricks of one member. And it was wrong that I took it out on you, like a little kid. I’m sorry.” Rintarou offered a formal apology.

However, Nayuki gave him a little smile and seemed completely dejected.

Uh-oh… I guess I really hurt her… I can’t say I blame her… I insulted Nayuki and turned my sword on her after she revealed her identity to save us… Dammit. I hate that I’m so immature…

What could he do to make up for it?

There was one obvious answer that transcended time and space.

“Hey, Nayuki…I think of you as a friend.”

He had to talk about it and open up. It didn’t matter if he was embarrassed or if he felt bad at communicating his feelings. He shouldn’t assume she could read his mind. He had to be honest and say it in his own words.

“…R-Rintarou…?”

“After all’s said and done, we’ve been together since the beginning—since I arrived here. I spend the most time with you, after Luna. You might

not believe me, but…I don't care that you used to be in the Dame du Lac anymore.

"Plus, I never thought of you as a stranger, for some reason…and I…uh… I think I want to keep spending time with you."

Rintarou turned away, attempting to play off his embarrassment by becoming grumpy.

"I…don't mean that in a weird way! I mean, I can't be the only one to rein in Luna! I need a helping hand!"

"…" Nayuki blinked back at him, dazed and confused.

"And… I appreciate you, you know?" Rintarou admitted.

"…Huh? You appreciate me…?"

"I just realized…you've been looking out for me from the start…"

That was right. When he thought back on it, Nayuki had always been consistent.

They'd met immediately after he'd arrived at the artificial island of New Avalon to join the King Arthur Succession Battle. She was the one who had encouraged him to link up with Luna.

When Rintarou had broken ties with Luna over an ideological difference, Nayuki had come up with a reason for him to make amends.

When an unprecedented enemy had been on the verge of destroying Luna's group…she had revealed her identity as a member of the Dame du Lac and risked her own life to save them.

On top of that, Nayuki was the one who had created an opportunity to control the "devil" inside him.

She had been watching over Rintarou the whole time…

That was exactly why he was suspicious of her.

"…Why do you go out of your way for me?"

There was nothing complicated about his question.

"So you're a member of the Dame du Lac. I imagine you know me more than I do myself… You've even tried to befriend a brat like me."

"…"

"…I really want to know because…I consider you a friend… Why would a decent girl do all this for me? It doesn't sit right with me…that I have no idea why you treat me so well…"

As soon as he said that, Rintarou tried to pretend it didn't happen by attempting to overwhelm her with word vomit.

"B-but I get it if you don't wanna talk about it! I imagine you have your reasons! I won't bring it up again!"

Nayuki gave him a gentle smile—as if she could read him like an open book.

"Am I…one of your friends now? Really?"

"Obviously. We've fought on the same battlefield, and you risked your life against the same enemy, right? Even if that hadn't happened, we're always hanging out and messing around… If we're not friends, then what

are we?" Rintarou was trying to hide his embarrassment by talking to her in a gruff manner.

Nayuki stared at Rintarou for a while…before she eventually spoke up.

"…Friends, huh…? So we're friends. I'm your friend…"

"Nayuki?"

"Mm-hmm, thank you. This makes me so happy…even though I don't have the right to your friendship… But you think of us as friends… Nothing could make me happier."

For some reason…Rintarou was a little uneasy upon seeing her joyous smile.

"Okay, Rintarou… I'll tell you what. I'll explain to you who I really am and why I helped you."

He felt his heart skip a beat.

"Nayuki… Are you sure? I know I was the one who asked, but you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. I wouldn't bug you about it. I'm not a kid."

"No…I want to tell you. This might be selfish of me, but…I really do want to tell you… I want you to know…"

Nayuki took a step toward Rintarou, almost begging him with her eyes.

"But I'm scared. I need…courage… The tiniest amount of it."

"…Courage?"

"Yes. Hey, Rintarou…do you have some time?"

"Hmm…well, school's over, and I just finished this stupid task, and I haven't really got anything planned. Guess I do have time."

"Okay. Then…will you go on a date with me—the two of us? Just once…"

"?!" Rintarou's jaw dropped to the floor.

However, she seemed so assured and ready for something that he immediately snapped out of it and looked at her.

"And then, at the end of the date, I'll tell you everything… How does that sound?"

He had to be sincere if she was being sincere.

"Okay, I—"

Rintarou didn't hesitate to try to accept…

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP.

Someone was sprinting down the hallway. The footsteps were getting closer.

BAM! The door to the student council room was kicked in.

The girl standing tall in the doorway was…

"Rintarou! Are you here?!"

…Luna. Who else?

"Gah! Luna?! Weren't you busy getting on the good side of the popular girls at school?!"

“Ha! They’re busy hanging out with the hottest guys I could hire using our treasury money! Now they’re all wrapped around my little finger. They’re so simple!”

“That’s what you’re doing with our treasury?!”

“Oh, forget that! Listen to this, Rintarou!” Luna ran over to his side.

Nayuki discreetly opened a path for her, moving away from Rintarou.

Luna yanked up the annoyed boy by his shirt collar, shaking him with all her might.

“The Ethics Committee has been secretly backing a candidate who’s my direct opponent! Itsuki Amakawa from Class 3! Gifted! Genuine! Good! He’s gained popularity, according to the poll from the newspaper club!”

“Whoa. That guy? Looks like it’s finally time to pay your dues.”

“Th-this is no joking matter! What’s with him?! I refuse to believe anyone is that perfect! It’s like he was born to lord over us! There’s no king better than me!”

“The fact that you ‘refuse to believe’ in upright citizens speaks volumes…”

“This is bad… This is real bad, Rintarou! The other candidates are nothing, but Itsuki Amakawa is a real strong contender! He might even overturn my administration…?!”

“That would be amazing! Oh, Itsuki Amakawa, I wish you luck!” Rintarou broke into a real smile.

“Anyway!” Luna tightened her grip and started to drag him away. “There’s no one in this world who’s got no weaknesses! He has to be wrapped up in some sort of scandal…! And we’re going to uncover it right now! Then we’ll launch a smear campaign! Got it?”

“No! That’s horrible! You’re seriously the worst kind of human!”

Luna pulled Rintarou along as he continued to defy her.

“You might not want to hear it from me, but can’t you fight him head-on?!” he screeched. “What if we can’t find any dirt on him?!”

“Oh, you silly rabbit! You don’t *find* scandals—you make them!”

“Do you write for a media gossip magazine or something?!”

Rintarou finally shook himself free from Luna’s grasp and jumped away from her.

“I’ve got important plans! I don’t have time to humor you today! Do it by yourself!”

“Whaaaat?! Nuh-uh! No way I’m going to do it without you! I mean, who else can I blame for these misdeeds, if not you?”

“You must take me as a secretary to your politician, Luna, if you think you can blame it on me and corner me into taking my life! I’m done with you!”

He really messed up when he’d decided on a faction to join… Rintarou regretted everything.

But once Luna started something, it was impossible to get her to stop.

Well, what could he do?

He had to choose between Luna and Nayuki…

His choice wasn't of any real consequence, but he would have preferred not to make the call at all…

Nayuki called out to him. "Um…I wouldn't mind doing things some other time, so why don't you go with Luna?"

"Huh?! Well, but…we were just about to…"

"It's fine, really. You've got to make sure you keep a close eye on her… If you leave her alone, who knows what could happen?"

"Uh, you've got a point…"

It pained him to admit she was right.

It was guaranteed that Luna would do something on her own if he left her to her own devices. Someone needed to be her keeper to make sure she didn't cross any lines…though he didn't know how useful he could be.

"So why don't you go with Luna for today?"

If Nayuki was urging him to do that, he didn't have room to argue.

"Geez…" Rintarou sighed and turned back to Nayuki. "Sorry. Well, about that thing… Would tomorrow work?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

She didn't seem like she minded, which made him feel worse. He bowed his head in apology.

"Sorry… Just when you were ready to talk about it… It's all this idiot's fault."

"Oh, that's not true. I kind of just sprung it on you… Plus, I wanted to be a little more mentally prepared…" Nayuki waved her hand as if to dispel the bad air around them. "So we'll do it tomorrow. Just the two of us."

"Yeah."

"Hmm? What are you two talking about?"

"Shut up. None of your business. It's between us," Rintarou snapped at Luna. "Go on. Lead the way."

"Ha-ha! That's the spirit! There's my vassal!"

Rintarou trudged after Luna. "A scandal, right? What are you scheming?"

"I have a plan! Imagine this: The train is full. I'm standing next to Itsuki Amakawa. I whirl over and grab his hand and raise it above my head. 'He just groped me!' I scream. 'Help!'"

"You wouldn't dare. If you do that, I'll slit your throat—no questions."

"I-it was a joke—a joke! Don't look at me with your scary eyes… I'm sorry, okay? I'm really sorry… Ow! Ow-ow-ow?! Get away from my neck!"

Rintarou and Luna walked over to the council room door, where he paused to offer an apologetic look to Nayuki.

"See ya, Nayuki…tomorrow."

And then he left the room with Luna.

"Yeah… See you tomorrow."

Nayuki watched after them with a tight-lipped smile.

…

“…Bad Nayuki,” she whispered to herself, letting her words ring through the vacant room.

It was already dark outside, almost evening. School had been over for a while now.

Nayuki remained in place after seeing them off…refusing to budge from her spot.

“I suck… Why didn’t I…just ask him to come with me…?”

Her expression was concealed by the shadows.

“Today…was my last chance…”

Something about her tone seemed melancholic.

The silence was stifling.

Darkness seemed to coil around her. Nayuki continued to mutter to herself.

“…But this was all for the best, wasn’t it…? I did something inexcusable to Rintarou…to Merlin… To believe that he might have forgiven me would be selfish…”

Nayuki snapped up her head as though she had a change of heart. For a little while now, she had felt something creeping up in her soul, looming nearer—the end of these halcyon days, the demise of her ephemeral dream.

“Rintarou…Merlin is fine now,” she said as though trying to convince herself. “Rintarou has Luna—a true king to serve.

“He’s strong enough to stand against fate now. It’ll all work out. I’m sure of it.

“The prediction of the three goddesses won’t come true.

“Things won’t go the way that wicked sorcerer foresaw it.

“I’m sure they can overcome anything.

“And…they’ll be able to save humanity from the Catastrophe…for sure.”

She placed her faith in them.

Nayuki left the student council room, expression clear as she walked through the dark hallway and released all the mana in her body. She shrouded herself in radiating particles, letting her appearance transform. Her silky black hair changed into a sparkling blue in the darkness. Her kind, black irises flooded with blue, gleaming. Her outfit looked like a thin dress that had been knit from fairy wings.

Upon manifesting her power as a Dame du Lac, Nayuki slipped through the entrance…and stepped into the schoolyard.

“And—this is something I need to settle by myself. I can’t let anyone else get mixed up in this mess—”

She readied herself as she paused in the schoolyard.

A woman stood on the sprawling campus, waiting for Nayuki. Hair the same shade of blue, eyes shining azure, and the same outfit.

She was the leader of the Dame du Lac, Vivian.

Nayuki faced her, placing a dozen yards between them. Without uttering a word, she let her eyes bore down on Vivian, who had been expecting her.

“Ha-ha, it’s been a while, Nayuki Fuyuse…or should I say, *Nimue*,” Vivian said, with an inscrutable look on her face.

“…Lady Vivian. You came,” Nayuki replied, seeming as though she had resigned herself. “I knew I couldn’t hide the fact that I undid the binds of my power as the Dame du Lac for battle…after it’s been sealed for so many years…”

“Obviously… I imagine you can guess why I’ve revealed myself to you today. Traitor. Harlot. You’ve made a big mess.”

As her lips broke into a smirk, Vivian’s glare pierced through Nayuki, eyes turning dark as the abyss.

She continued dispassionately. “In the legendary era, you heeded my orders, getting closer to Merlin…and sealing him away, thereby murdering him. I’ll give you that.”

“…”

“The Dame du Lac weaponize our charm to lead men by the nose and control them… But to think *you* were the one seduced by Merlin! A lovesick girl scouring the world for the reincarnated form of Merlin, casting *Masking* to leave our organization? Even I wouldn’t have been able to track him down. After all, who knows where a soul might reincarnate? You were searching for a needle in a haystack.”

“…”

“You know, if you’d stopped there, I wouldn’t have blamed you. Merlin would have been considerably weakened, seeing how many moons have passed since his death.

“It wouldn’t have been a problem if he’d lived as a human. Even if he’d stuck his nose in the succession battle, he would have died from being so weak. Worst case, we would have dealt with him using our own methods.

“If it didn’t cause me any inconvenience…I might have even let the two of you live together if you managed to stumble upon his reincarnated human form… But you helped him regain his original power!”

Vivian sounded like she was a court magistrate from hell declaring a guilty verdict.

Nayuki accepted it in silence. She was on death row, resigning herself to receive her punishment.

“Do you understand the gravity of your actions?! The bastard child should have been sealed away and killed again! Because you reawakened the power within him, the course of fate has changed—to fulfill the doomsday prophecy! How dare you!”

“That’s…”

“Even after you went through all that to find him…the home-wrecker had already made her way to his side! You unfortunate soul. I can’t even laugh at your circumstances. In fact, I pity you.”

“…*Master*!” Nayuki screeched, unable to endure it any longer. She glared at Vivian. “We were in the wrong! Even if the three goddesses predicted this fate…it doesn’t justify robbing Merlin of a future!”

“…What?!” Vivian’s eyes opened slightly. She didn’t expect Nayuki to raise her voice. The Nimue she knew wasn’t the type to assert her own opinion.

“Hmph. Dear me. They say love is blind… You’re unable to make any decisions in a calm and logical manner.”

This didn’t dissuade Nayuki. She implored Vivian, “I could say the same about you, Master! Why are you letting the Catastrophe happen?! Why are you focused on saving the world after humanity is destroyed?! Are you sure you have your priorities in order?!

“We should be trying to prevent the Catastrophe!”

“……” Vivian went silent.

“You think I don’t know?! The three goddesses told the Dame du Lac: ‘The Catastrophe will befall humanity soon, and the Curtain of Consciousness will crumble, marking the end for humankind!’ …But they showed us another possible future!

“‘Fate can be altered if Merlin serves the true King Arthur!’ Why are you so insistent on eliminating Merlin and reviving King Arthur to *save the world after it’s destroyed*?!”

Vivian’s mien changed. Her ladylike bearing and expression completely dissolved. Her eyes became as empty as the pits of hell, and there was something dark and chilly about her air.

“Hee-hee-hee… How strange… With the exception of the three goddesses of fate, I should be the only one privy to the latter part of the prediction, as the one chosen to be the direct oracle… I’d intentionally left that out. How did you hear about it? Where and *from whom* did you get this information?”

“…Uh?!”

This triggered a memory to reemerge in Nayuki’s mind.

“Hee-hee, Nayuki Fuyuse…or should I call you Nimue? It’s been a while.

“Do you wish to see him? Do you want to apologize? Do you want to atone for your sins?

“Head to the man-made island of New Avalon, which is nearing its completion.

“Yes, the site of the ceremony that the Dame du Lac are organizing behind the scenes.

“You will most certainly be able to reunite with him there.”

“I’m the one asking the questions, Master! Please answer me! Why in the world would you—?!”

Vivian cackled coldly in the middle of Nayuki’s impassioned interrogation.

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s because the humans are so weak… It’s because they are fragile and unable to live decent lives without our protection.”

“Huh?!”

“Why don’t you go over that second prophecy again after cooling your head off? ‘Fate can be altered if Merlin serves the true King Arthur.’ We can

‘alter’ the future…but we can’t *prevent* it from happening.” Vivian chuckled as if this was checkmate. “‘The end for humankind’ is a certain outcome. Meanwhile, the other prophecy is vague… Who can say what it means?

“Throughout human history, the three goddesses have offered a hundred thirty-seven prophecies. And they have only been wrong four times. Can’t you see the initial prediction is practically inevitable? The demise of humankind isn’t preventable.”

“But…it’s not absolute!”

Vivian ignored her desperate entreaty. “And Merlin is a potential danger… You can’t turn a blind eye to that. You know Merlin is the ‘one who will kill King Arthur.’ He was born with this fate as the bastard of an evil god. That’s why I ordered you to eliminate him in the ancient era. Didn’t you agree to carry out this job?”

“B-but…!”

“How could King Arthur’s assassin serve the true king? That’s impossible. Even if they’re touted to be heroes, King Arthur and Merlin are humans, when it comes down to it. No human can alter the course of fate. That’s why we need to eliminate Merlin to protect King Arthur in the modern era and save the world after the Catastrophe.”

“What?!” Nayuki felt powerless.

She realized they would never be on the same page, even if she tried to reason with Vivian.

“Stop clinging onto a glimmer of hope… Isn’t it more constructive to prepare to save the world post-Catastrophe? The only one for the job is King Arthur. He will rule over the people as king and help them see this world is their own. That’s the reason for the King Arthur Succession Battle. I’m taking the necessary actions for this world and humanity. It would make my job easier if you understood that. You’re like a dog in heat.”

“I…”

It was correct in a way. For King Arthur to save humankind, they needed to eliminate the assassin—Merlin. Vivian wasn’t mistaken about that…

“But, Master… You’re wrong,” Nayuki said firmly. “Do you need humanity to be destroyed to save it? Will you abandon all possibilities of avoiding that collapse? That’s a faulty argument!”

“No. You know nothing about the absoluteness of the three goddesses’ predictions—”

“No! You just want to keep controlling and governing humankind yourself!”

Vivian’s eyebrow twitched. It seemed Nayuki had touched a nerve.

Vivian’s bearing transformed to become even heavier, sharper, and darker. With a cold and cruel gleam, her eyes pierced through Nayuki, murderous.

Nayuki kept going as though she were making an indictment. “It’s certainly true that we, as the Dame du Lac, have intervened with the human world to manipulate their fate and future!

“We’ve wedged ourselves into international leadership to control the people! I won’t comment on the ethicality of these methods, but we’ve been helping them thrive! So maybe humans are weak! I doubt one could defend themselves against a lower-class monster, and they always seem to go down the wrong path! That’s exactly why we had to protect them with the Curtain of Consciousness—to guide them!

“But humankind has evolved over the course of thousands of years! And they’ve started to move away from our grasp. They’ve left the nest, so to speak. Maybe they aren’t totally dependable…and maybe they stray from their paths… But they’ve started to walk on their own—toward a brighter future.

“There’s no longer a need for the Dame du Lac! …It’s over! But you can’t accept that! You want to be the queen to rule the world forever… Am I wrong?!”

“……”

“That’s why you’ll let this world end…! You want to reset humankind so they’re dependent on the Dame du Lac again…! Tell me that’s not true!”

“……”

“Master…I mean, Vivian, you’re no protector of humanity. Right now, you’re just a pathetic monster obsessed with controlling humans! You refuse to openly discuss the possibility of true salvation! When you disregarded that option, you became a beast! The enemy of humankind!”

“Ha—”

Vivian started to chuckle…

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Her peals of laughter sounded like the warble of the maddened harbinger of calamity.

“My… You’ve learned to speak your mind, Nimue,” Vivian observed coldly.

Behind her, a pillar of water shot up toward the heavens. It crackled, freezing over, to morph into a mountain of ice. It was Vivian’s specialty—*Water* magic for fey.

“Who would have guessed an airhead would be so proactive…? Back then, I revived you as a half-fey, half-human as a joke—when you were plagued by the immortal coil, reduced to a rag of a human on your deathbed… I’m glad I had you make that vow of silence… ‘To never say anything inconvenient to me in front of others.’ …Even a pawn requires a safety mechanism… Ha-ha-ha…”

“Vivian…!”

“Your mischief ends here! I imagine you know why I’m in front of you today—to punish an ungrateful traitor with death.”

Her body started to radiate tremendous power. Nayuki’s mana couldn’t compare in sheer quantity, in density—in every other way.

The handsome woman looked like a looming giant. This was Vivian, the leader of the Dame du Lac, the half-human, half-fey organization. She possessed the power of someone with one foot in the illusory world.

"…Gh!" Nayuki released her mana, feeling almost despondent.

With a magic chant, she transformed the cold front around them into an ice sword. Her powers were staggering. The other members in the Dame du Lac could never dream of outdoing her.

However, her magic didn't offer her any comfort against Vivian. They were in vastly different leagues. It wouldn't even be a fair fight.

But…if I survive here…if I have a chance at tomorrow…!

A certain man of her affections flashed in Nayuki's mind.

She knew she would never get through to him. She knew he would never be hers. But she thought of the smile of the man she'd loved for over a thousand years…

Nayuki prepared her ice sword.

Vivian chuckled in a relaxed manner. "Oh, Nimue. Did you forget who taught you how to fight with a sword and use magic? Do you think you can win against me?"

A menacing nature and enmity radiated from Vivian. Her illusion ballooned to several times her size, threatening to crush Nayuki.

"To begin, the 'Dame du Lac' originally was a term referring to me. After all, the others were underlings I endowed with my power… You're just an imitation—an inferior replica."

"…Ah…" Nayuki's forehead beaded with sweat as Vivian's force surged over her. She trembled, going weak in her knees.

She realized she was going to die here. She was going to be killed.

But I can't lose… I don't want to die yet…! Rintarou…I…I…!

She tried to stop herself from trembling, launching herself off the ground, shrouded in a blizzard, and preparing her ice sword as she started to charge at Vivian.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaah!" she screamed, as if to scold her timid heart.

"Oh please." Vivian chuckled again. "With your brave face, I thought you'd improved. Nimue, is this all you've got?"

She smiled—cruelly.

In the next moment, Vivian manipulated a torrent of water like a tsunami behind her. Its frostiness seemed to pierce through Nayuki, swirling around them.

Several thousand ice spears shone above Vivian's head.

…

The day after…

"Okay, okay, okay! Let's keep up the good work!"

""""Whoooo-hoooo!""""

During lunch at Camelot High, the classroom filled with the energetic cries of Luna and the acting student council members.

“We’re going to continue with yesterday’s campaign activities—handing out flyers about my platform! I’m counting on affiliated students, too!” Luna was instructing them, fired up from the morning.

“It helps that Kay and Emma draw the eye.”

“Uh-huh! All the students take the flyers, hypnotized by their beauty! It’s very effective!”

“Emma is cute, and Kay is cool, and they’re both popular with all genders!”

“They’re an impenetrable battle formation, huh?”

All gathered in the student council room (aka Luna’s flunkies) were lavishing Sir Kay and Emma with praise.

“Ah…um… Luna? Why am I…?”

“Let’s just get through this, Emma…”

The costumes of the day were racy nurse and pit girl. There were so many grievances. Where would they even start?

Felicia got up from her seat. “L-Luna! Do we really get five cents per flyer handed out?”

“You got that right! High return! This is your chance to rake in some money!”

“Th-thank you so much! We’re forever indebted to you!”

“This is amazing, my King! I think we might be able to scrape by for dinner!”

Poor Felicia and Sir Gawain were ecstatic, clasping hands in glee.

“Yeah. The transfer student and new teacher have been raising the bar.”

“I mean, they don’t have any shame! They’ll beg on their hands and knees for students to take a flyer… I would feel too bad to leave empty-handed…”

“Uh-oh… I’m starting to tear up…”

The student council members regarded Felicia and Sir Gawain with looks of pity.

“Rintarou! Have you finished the article for Itsuki Amakawa’s smear campaign?! I want to circulate that with the flyers!”

“You’re so bossy! I’m working on it right now…”

Rintarou faced a computer, clacking away, as Luna planted her hands on his shoulders and peeked over at the monitor. Even though she was heavy, he let her stay there as he typed.

“Oh? Looks pretty good. I shouldn’t have expected less, Rintarou! No lies in sight, just shuffling around the words to totally change the meaning of the sentences—making an upstanding citizen a despicable one! Ha-ha-ha! I love Japanese!”

“Someday you’re gonna get what’s coming to you…”

Rintarou sighed with dead eyes, as if he’d given up on life. He couldn’t resist her influence.

“All right, let’s get moving! To our victory!”

“““To our victory!”””

“Is this some kind of cult? Idiots! All of you!” Rintarou screeched, head buried in his hands as the students remained in high spirits.

They started to gather their belongings to begin their tasks for the day.

“Oh, Luna,” he called out. “Something has been bothering me all morning.”

“What?”

“…Have you seen Nayuki?”

“Hmm? Nah-you-key?” Luna tilted her head to the side.

“Um… We haven’t seen her all morning. Is she out sick today?” Rintarou asked.

He was going to bring it up earlier, but he’d been so consumed with work for the campaign that he kept missing his chance to ask her.

“…Have you heard anything?”

“Then…will you go on a date with me—the two of us? Just once…”

“Yeah…see you tomorrow.”

He didn’t think he would take back his response…but for some reason, he felt a pang of regret.

Luna blinked at him. “Um… Uh… Rintarou? Who’s ‘Nayuki’?”

“Haaaah…,” Rintarou sighed. Loudly. “Stop playing dumb. Have you heard from her or not?”

“Um, like I said… Who is ‘Nayuki’?!”

Luna raised her voice, which dampened the room’s excited vibe.

“…Huh? Do you hear yourself? I’m talking about Nayuki Fuyuse. You know the one.”

“Nah-you-key Foo-you-seh… Who is that? Can *you* stop joking around?”

“…Hey. Cut it out. You’re starting to get on my nerves.”

Something was wrong… Rintarou was starting to babble as if to ward off this uncanny feeling.

“She’s *your* student council’s chief secretary! What? Don’t tell me you have dementia.”

“The chief secretary?! We haven’t had a chief secretary since—wait, huh?”

Luna stopped midway through her sentence, cocking her head to the side before turning to the members of the student council.

“Uh, guys? …Who is the chief secretary again?”

“Huh? Come to think of it…”

“Luna is the president. I’m the vice president. Mihashi is the chief of general affairs. Rocky is chief of PR. Rinsha is chief of audits. Um, and then…”

They started to rattle off their own positions…

“The chief secretary…? Who is that?”

“Hmm? Uh… Maybe the secretary is absent? Or maybe we never even had one?”

“B-but there’s no way. You appointed all the positions when you got elected, President Luna…”

“Hmm…?”

Nayuki Fuyuse’s name never came up.

There was an awkward silence. Rintarou didn’t get the slightest hint that they were trying to prank him.

“Hey…Felicia. This is weird…” Rintarou was drenched in sweat as he turned to her.

“Um…I’m sorry, Rintarou. I don’t know a ‘Nah-you-key Foo-you-seh.’”

“What’s wrong, Rintarou? Did something happen to that girl?”

Felicia and Sir Gawain were acting the same way.

Starting to gather that something was wrong, Rintarou whipped over to Sir Kay and Emma. However, they apologetically shook their heads, signaling they were just as lost.

“Hey, wait a sec…”

He felt as though the ground were crumbling away under his feet and he was floating.

Eventually, Luna decided they were wasting precious time.

“Maybe I slipped up and never appointed anyone? It’s fine. I’ll take care of it when I’m reelected. Say, Rintarou, do you want to be the secretary?”

“Fat chance! I mean, that’s not the problem here!” Rintarou shouted. “… What’s going on? This can’t be happening… Why have you completely forgotten about Nayuki…?! What’s up with you guys?!”

“Why are you digging in your heels?! Is there something wrong with you?!”

Rintarou felt chills as Luna glared at him.

“…Why don’t you give me more details about this ‘Nayuki Fuyuse,’ Rintarou?”

“Huh?”

“It’s obviously a girl! You have the honor of serving the best lord in history and you’re cheating on me with some other girl? I-I’ll never forgive you!”

“…”

“Well, I guess we’re not dating! You’re free to be with anyone you please! I don’t care at all! But I’m your lord! Which means…you need to ask me for permission… Uuuugh!”

Luna must have misunderstood something, because she was glaring at him with tears in her eyes.

“—Gh!” Rintarou sprinted out of the student council room, ignoring her.

“Rintarou?!”

“W-wait! What in the world is going on with you?!”

He heard her yell from behind.

“Hey… What kind of sick joke is this…?!”

In his haste, Rintarou parted the students walking down the hallway.

“…Nayuki… What happened to you…?!”

He wasn’t directing his question at anyone in particular.

There was no one around to answer it anyway.

CHAPTER 2

Don’t Lay Down Your Life

To get right to the point… Nayuki Fuyuse had been erased from this world.

That meant she couldn’t be located. Everyone affiliated with Camelot International High School had lost all memory of her.

Suspecting someone had cast a strange spell on them, Rintarou examined the school with his psychic senses, but there were no signs of magical tampering.

Her name had been scrubbed from all official documents—it was not in the family registries, in certificates of residence, or on lists of Social Security numbers. Even the apartment he’d heard she lived in was empty. He couldn’t locate a single thing that belonged to her. And her neighbors had no recollection of her, either.

It was almost laughable that she had disappeared so completely.

Rintarou had exhausted all methods to search for Nayuki’s whereabouts, and yet he still had no leads.

Three days passed with no progress, overwhelming anxiety, and fear.

“Ha-ha! Good job today, Rintarou!”

“…Sure.” Rintarou trudged behind Luna, who stomped through the school halls.

Unlike Rintarou’s difficult search for Nayuki, Luna’s campaign was going well.

The outsourced team—Emma, Felicia, and Sir Gawain—were the cream of the crop. With both her honest and nefarious strategies, Luna was steadily gaining the lead in the school’s public opinion.

“Whew. Equipped with your iron defenses for the debate, Rintarou, we won the discussion by a landslide!”

“Sure…”

“Heh-heh-heh! You’ve made a masterpiece! Did you see the look on the other candidates’ faces when I beat them? And—”

“…”

Luna continued to rave beside him. Rintarou was distracted, thoughts occupied by…Nayuki, naturally.

Nayuki…where did you disappear off to…? And why did you…?

It wasn’t like she was his girlfriend or anything…but she had been an important friend. In fact…there was something familiar about her, as if this wasn’t the first time they’d met.

When she disappeared without a trace, he couldn’t deny she had left a gaping hole in his heart.

…I wanted to protect Luna and Sir Kay and Emma… And also Felicia and Sir Gawain, I guess, even though they're idiots… You were always grinning, Nayuki, in our annoying group… Without you…

A sigh pushed past his lips.

There wasn't anything he could do.

He'd thought everything would fall into place if he dedicated some effort to it…but this was damaging his ego. Rintarou felt powerless.

"Um… Sorry, Rintarou…," Luna suddenly said from next to him.

"Wh-what are you sorry for all of a sudden…? What's wrong?"

"Um… You seem tired. I know I've been unreasonable lately…" Luna seemed worried, observing him with sad puppy dog eyes.

I must look like shit if she's making this expression… Rintarou was annoyed that he was so worthless.

It wasn't clear if she knew what he was thinking, but she took on a brave tone.

"So I've got a reward for you! You don't have to do any work after school today!"

"Yeah?"

"After I'm finished for the day, I'll grant you the privilege of going on a date with me at a café! Your treat! What do you think?! I bet you can't wait!"

"How is that a reward in any way? I wish I could lock you up and interrogate you a hundred thousand times! It's like you love to exploit me!"

"Sounds good! I need to wrap up the last thing on my schedule! Wait for me. If you leave before me, it's capital punishment for you!"

"…Are you hell-bent on punishing me?"

Rintarou watched Luna from behind as she marched away triumphantly…

"…Whew." Rintarou collapsed onto a bench on the outskirts of the schoolyard.

Lately, he had been so swamped with Luna's campaign and searching for Nayuki that he hadn't had a chance to catch his breath until now.

The campus seemed ablaze as the sun set on the horizon. The shadows of the student athletes were bouncing around energetically.

It felt like it was all far away as Rintarou turned inward.

"…Dammit…Nayuki… Where did you go…?"

It was like Nayuki Fuyuse never existed in this world… Maybe she was just an imaginary friend that he'd fabricated in his mind.

Tch…I've got to keep it together… She's real… I know she is…!

The day before Nayuki had disappeared, it was obvious that something had befallen her, and yet he had chosen Luna over her. Now he was saddled with regret.

If only I'd been with her…! Dammit! Why did I have to leave her alone?! Right when she was ready to talk to me about something…

There was nothing to absolve his regret.

Maybe…I was unconsciously afraid of hearing what she had to say…? Maybe I wanted it to remain the way things were…ignorant, but blissful.

Rintarou was grilling himself.

"Hey, Rintarou!"

Someone seemed to be scolding him from behind, yelling at him with a voice that was an earsore.

He turned around…

"Gah?!"

Luna's archnemesis at school—the Ethics Committee chairman Tsugumi Mimori—stood there imposingly.

"Rintarou! I need you to be sensible! Luna has been out of control!"

"Not my problem… What do you want me to do?" Rintarou grumbled, fed up to the back teeth.

"Feign innocence all you want, but you're the only one she listens to! We need you to keep better control over Luna or we'll be in trouble! What was with that debate? You just let her do her crazy performance on stage! A debate should be more—"

Tsugumi was beginning her sermon.

Since Luna was absurdly good at escaping from her clutches, things always came around to Rintarou.

That was just how things went.

Dammit! Luna told me to take it easy because of this, huh?! Do I never get to rest…?

Rintarou held his own head, letting Tsugumi's lecture go in one ear and pour out the other. He didn't have time for this.

"—Do you understand now?! Please get a better handle on things!"

"Fine, whatever…"

It seemed the lecture of the day (by proxy) was over.

Rintarou plugged his ringing ears, sighing in relief.

"…Putting that aside." Tsugumi looked down at Rintarou, into his dead eyes. "Hee-hee-hee… Seems you're exhausted. I never would have thought you would be so upset about losing *Nayuki Fuyuse*…"

"—Huh?!" He snapped his head up to stare at her face.

"I suppose people *can* change… Heh-heh… I'm pleased to see you grow, but it might pose problems if you get too gutless…"

At some point, the air around Tsugumi Mimori had transformed.

Though she retained her beautiful face, it had been elevated to something beguiling that had the potential to seduce even the devil. She seemed to be outlined by darkness, as if they were in the bottom of the abyss.

The air turned dull, heavy, and cold.

While she was still human in shape, Tsugumi had become a monster, beyond human.

"…Who are you…?"

He realized no one was around them. Though the schoolyard had just been buzzing with athletic activity, there was no one else there.

He had been launched into a world of silence.

The campus burned red at dusk, making dark shadows of Tsugumi and Rintarou that stretched like an endless corridor to the reaches of the horizon.

"…Tsugumi Mimori… You couldn't be—?"

"Does it really matter who I am right now, Merlin…?" Her empty eyes reflected no light, staring right into his soul.

"Right. Wait… Do you remember Nayuki?"

"Why, of course. I remember her just as well as you do." She let out an ominous chuckle. "I'm surprised you remember her… That must mean you're regaining your powers from the ancient era. You're heading in a good direction. Everything I've done has been worth it."

Shing… Rintarou was already standing with his swords at the ready. However, he still hadn't tried swinging them down on her. There was something he needed to ask first.

"Do you know…where Nayuki went? Do you know what happened to her? Or did you do something to her…?"

Depending on her answer, he would cut her down. Brimming with dreadful animosity, Rintarou had questioned Tsugumi.

"Hee-hee-hee. You only have my word…but I haven't done anything to her."

She sounded like she was enjoying herself, mocking Rintarou.

"But I *do* know what happened that day—when Nayuki disappeared… *Because I was watching.*"

"What?! Then answer me! What happened to Nayuki?! What went down that day?!"

"I could tell you, but…would you believe me? What if I'm lying to trick you?"

"…"

She was right. He shouldn't think of her as Tsugumi Mimori, a member of the Ethics Committee.

This girl was a witch—the particular witch he loathed the most in the entire world.

He couldn't believe a single word that came out of her mouth.

"Since that's the case…would you synchronize your consciousness with me—just for a little while?"

"?!"

"Our minds will temporarily convene in the deep subconscious. There, you can read my memories directly… What do you say?"

Rintarou went silent.

That certainly was one way to find out the truth. If he peeked directly into her depths, she had no way of lying. It was impossible even for a god to fake something in there.

But it was dangerous.

To connect consciousness and probe memories was like peering into an abyss without a lifeline. If things went badly, he wouldn't be able to come back.

On top of that, he would be in Tsugumi's domain—the void.

Who knew what kinds of traps would lie in wait for him there?

If you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you. However…

"Fine. Let me peer into your void. But I get to take the lead. All right?"

Rintarou got ready to step into danger of his own volition.

"Hmm? I was just saying that because I never thought someone as guarded as you would willingly put yourself at risk. Hee-hee-hee. So you've changed. Up until now, you would have tortured me in captivity until I spilled the truth."

"Shut your mouth. I've given up on those methods."

"Hmm? Influenced by Luna? Someone's stopped being so rough around the edges…"

Tsugumi stepped toward Rintarou, closed her eyes, and stuck out her forehead.

"Just to be clear, don't try anything funny," he warned. "If you do, I'll send your head flying on the spot. I'm not so gutless that I wouldn't protect myself from danger."

"…I'll keep that in mind."

Without allowing his guard to lower in the slightest, Rintarou extended his pointer finger…and touched Tsugumi's temple.

Then, he steadied his breath and concentrated, refining his mana…and chanting under his breath.

Rintarou's consciousness cut off from his flesh. His flesh was grounded on the physical plane ruled by the laws of physics, while his spirit was an existence untethered to time and space. This all happened in a fleeting moment in the real world…

Rintarou had a chance to meet the truth.

Huh?!

He caught a glimpse into the memory of the past.

Flashing in his consciousness was the schoolyard exactly three days prior. This was the unknown—and it had been unfurled from beginning to end.

"We were in the wrong! Even if the three goddesses predicted this fate… it doesn't justify robbing Merlin of a future!"

He witnessed Vivian, who had been waiting for Nayuki. The two had severed their ties.

Ah. He could tell what was going on just by seeing them.

"I could say the same about you, Master! You can't make a sound judgment! Why are you letting the Catastrophe happen?! Why are you

focused on saving the world after humanity is destroyed?! Are you sure you have your priorities in order?!

“We should be trying to prevent the Catastrophe!”

He understood her feelings for him—that she had walked a path of hardship, incredible sorrow, pain, and discontent.

“Master…I mean, Vivian, you’re no protector of humanity. Right now, you’re just a pathetic monster obsessed with controlling humans! You refuse to openly discuss the possibility of true salvation! When you disregarded that option, you became a beast! The enemy of humankind!”

From their exchange, Rintarou knew Nayuki had weighed her obligations and feelings for him on a scale, fighting alone for a long time.

“My… You’ve learned to speak your mind, Nimue.”

However, Vivian sneered at Nayuki’s desperation—unceasingly cruel and merciless. With deep malice, she tried to crush Nayuki’s emotions.

“Your mischief ends here! I imagine you know why I’m in front of you today—to punish an ungrateful traitor with death.”

She was trying to swallow Nayuki with her limitless power.

Facing against Vivian, Nayuki’s face expressed grim heartbreak.

Even without words, it was almost painful the way she communicated her emotions.

If I survive here…if I have a chance at tomorrow…

…Why?

Why did I have to abandon Nayuki when she was secretly carrying this out? Why couldn’t I have stayed by her side?

I know she’s the type to shoulder the burden herself to avoid wrapping us into her mess.

What the hell was I so afraid of?

The floodgates opened, engulfing Rintarou’s heart with regret as he watched.

As he remained unable to do anything, a ghastly slaughter commenced in front of him.

“Ugh! Aaaaaaaah?!”

Nayuki shrieked in agony, her voice ringing through the nighttime blizzard.

There were flashes of red. Scarlet. Crimson.

“Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Vivian’s high-pitched squeals of laughter grated his ears.

The ice spears had come together to form a barrage; tens of thousands of them rained down on her.

They assaulted her petite body, skewered her. She was being ripped into shreds.

Without mercy or compassion, Vivian snickered as she continued to tease Nayuki, to make sport of her body, to torment her. It was cruel, ruthless.

Blood speckled through space. It was almost laughably beautiful.

Nayuki was armed with an ice sword, covered in frosty air, trying to counterattack. However, her attempts didn't even matter. They would never take it to Vivian.

The cruelest part of all this was that Nayuki couldn't die immediately because she was half-fey.

"…Gah! …Rintarou…! …I…I…!"

Stained with blood, her body had become a mountain of spears as she desperately swung her sword, trying to ward off the icicles showering down on her like meteors. She endured it all, calling out his name.

But there would be no salvation for her.

…Stop…! Nayuki! That's enough…! Stop…! Rintarou barked out voicelessly as more blades lacerated her body and fouled her luscious hair and soft skin.

Her dainty body jerked around as the spears slashed her, tugged in all directions like a broken puppet.

She was blasted away, launched off the ground, rebounding.

This couldn't be called a fight. How long would this unfair slaughter last?

"Ah. Ugh…ah…"

Nayuki's arms were extended to her sides, pinned up by spears to the wall of a school building.

Blood stained the ice that pierced her palms, her arms, her chest, her stomach, her shoulders, and her legs. The frozen blood flaked into red chips that were blown away by the blizzard.

She seemed like a pinned insect specimen.

That, or a crucified saint.

"…*Cough*. Gah… Ugh… Ah…"

Much of her body was frozen over, and she could no longer move a single finger…

"Hee-hee. Do you understand your position?" Vivian looked up at Nayuki with joy and disdain before offering an ultimatum. "But seeing that I'm kind, I'll give you one last chance, Nimue."

Her lips spread into a bewitching and detestable grin. "You must ensnare Merlin…Rintarou Magami. You may whisper sweet nothings to him or use your beautiful physique… Either way, you must make him your captive once more."

"…What?!"

"Seal him away again. Kill him. Only then will I absolve your crimes. I believe you can do this, right?"

It's fine…it's fine, Nayuki…, Rintarou thought as he heard this echo of a memory.

Nayuki had already gone above and beyond. This entire time, she had been shouldering this burden all by herself.

There hadn’t been a moment of rest for her—even as Rintarou had been a little brat with a huge ego, playing the world’s smallest violin, believing he was the most unfortunate person in the world.

Nayuki had been working by herself for all that time. And wasn’t that enough?

Even if Nayuki had given in to Vivian, Rintarou had already decided he wouldn’t hold it against her. In fact, there were things he wanted to apologize to her for and tell her—

…It’s fine… You should…!

“…”

In the end, Nayuki limply…but with authority…shook her head to the side.

She had turned down Vivian’s offer.

“…I don’t want to do that… I’m never going to betray Rintarou…Merlin… ever again…”

…Stop…! Please…! Stop…!

His inner screams fell on deaf ears.

This was a memory of the past. It had already come to be. He couldn’t step in to help her.

His words and emotions could never speak to her. Even though he was watching from up close, Rintarou could do nothing.

“You’re a hopeless imbecile. There’s no saving you. It was a mistake to accept you into the Dame du Lac.”

She glanced at Nayuki as though she were disdainfully looking at trash that had served its purpose.

Vivian raised her hand, causing cold air to gather and eddy around it. It solidified into an ice spear as long as a telephone pole—a staggeringly lethal and fiendish weapon.

If that thing went through her, Nayuki would likely be torn into nothing.

Stop… Stop! Stop! Stop…! Rintarou howled in his heart, but it was futile.

“…Are you ready, Nimue?” Vivian asked like an executioner to Nayuki, who was pinned limply above her head. “…Sweet dreams.”

She launched the icy blade.

It tore through the blizzard, splitting it in half as it flew at high speed.

Nayuki groaned as she watched the tip of the spear come at her. That was all she could do…

“…Sorry…Rintarou…,” she murmured at the end.

Tears formed at the corners of her eyes. “…I…couldn’t…keep my promise…”

“Stoooooooooooooooooop!”

His own scream almost popped his eardrums, and his consciousness snapped back to reality, leaving the memories of the past.

“Hah…! Haah…! Haah…!”

He lifted his finger off Tsugumi’s forehead and staggered backward. Sweat started to gush out of his pores. It was sickening.

It felt like his heart was going to burst, pounding violently in his chest. His vision spun. His consciousness turned white, his breath was as hot as fire, and it felt like he was going to puke out his entire stomach. He had the sensation of being suspended in the air, as if the world had been smashed to pieces.

He desperately endured these feelings as he tried to piece together his scattered self with brute force.

“Dammit…! Nayuki…! Nayuki… Gah! Ugh…?!”

He had seen it. He’d had the misfortune of witnessing the situation. Now he knew.

Nayuki Fuyuse was dead.

Her body had been torn apart. She had been turned into a fog of mana.

She no longer existed in this world.

Rintarou had ended up making the mistake of seeing it all—from start to finish.

“Ah…ugh, ah, ahhh…! N-Nayuki…! Why did you…?!”

Rintarou desperately held back his tears, gritting his molars with enough force to make them groan from the pressure. His shoulders heaved with each breath.

“It seems…you saw the truth of the past without a problem…”

She snickered.

Tsugumi Mimori was laughing.

He realized she was no longer in her school uniform.

Instead, she wore a jet-black robe that revealed slivers of her body. Her enchanting face was half covered by lace… She was a witch who seemed to be born from the darkness.

Rintarou knew her.

He remembered her name, his memories as Merlin bubbling up from within him.

Her *Masking* magic shattered, letting the figure in his memory overlap with the one in front of him.

She had been the opponent who had stood in front of them many times, only to provoke them.

Her name was—

“Morgan…! Morgan le Fay…!”

“Hee-hee-hee. Long time no see… Would you say that’s the appropriate greeting, Merlin?”

He was having a chance meeting with the second-strongest mage of the legendary era.

“…What are you scheming…?! Why are you working behind the scenes of the succession battle…?! What are you trying to do…?!”

“I may be concocting something. Hee-hee… But I’ll never tell you the details.”

Morgan evaded his question with scorn.

“Anyway, Merlin… You know the truth now. Nayuki Fuyuse died by the hands of Vivian, the head of the Dame du Lac… What are you going to do?”

Morgan didn’t try to mince her words, declaring this without mercy.

It was almost as if she knew how the future would go…

“I could hardly think *the* Merlin himself would give up without saying his piece… There’s no way, right? Hee-hee-hee…” Morgan snickered as though she was goading him.

“…Is that what this is about?” Rintarou glared at her, overwhelmed with tempestuous hatred and rage. His frigid eyes seemed as though they could kill her with just a look. “Are you telling me this is all according to your calculations…?! Even my future actions?! All this time, you’ve been manipulating everyone in the King Arthur Succession Battle…!”

“Maybe? Who can say? I’ll leave that up to your imagination.”

“Tch! You’re shameless!”

Morgan had transferred her true memories to Rintarou *with that goal in mind*. She had gone out of her way to show him her own consciousness instead of telling him, so Rintarou could witness Nayuki’s brutal death. All so she could provoke him.

Ah, it was audacious. Just plain distasteful.

Morgan was one or two steps ahead of him. And even though he knew that, he could only dance on the palm of her hand.

“Fine. I’ll entertain you for now, Morgan le Fay. But don’t expect me to fulfill your expectations in the end…!” Rintarou howled.

The heavens would have shuddered from his wrath, but Morgan snickered and smiled bewitchingly as she waved him off. She pinched the hems of her robe with her fingers, bowing gracefully. Her body seemed to dissolve into the shadows, melting away into the dark.

With that, the world whirred into motion again. When he looked around, the student athletes filled his vision as they engaged in their club activities.

Rintarou watched that peaceful scene for a while…

“…Just you wait, Vivian.”

Suddenly, he disappeared—no, jumped through the air.

With a single kick, he reached the edge of the school roof. Another kick launched him into the sky. He was charging right through the air of the international city of Avalonia, from rooftop to rooftop. The cityscape flashed past him, trailing behind him like a stream.

“You’re the one I could never forgive.”

His mind and soul burned with resentment.

Rintarou sprinted and soared, whizzing through the sky.

The rooftops were his launching platforms as he ran from wall to wall of skyscrapers, racing in front of trains. He jumped off cars and touched down on traffic lights, going higher and higher.

He did it fiercely, savagely, resolutely, a certain location in mind.

He was a violent tornado, tearing through the city toward Area One of Avalonia.

Rintarou was lost in thought. *Nayuki… So you were Nimue…*

Nimue from the Dame du Lac. Merlin's former lover.

She was the traitor who had tricked him, sealed him away, and murdered him.

…I've had my suspicions for a while… I couldn't get the pieces to fit because you had Masking on you, which was why you didn't match up with my memories… I thought there was a vague possibility…but…!

Rintarou hadn't touched on it on purpose. He hadn't wanted to get too involved with Nimue.

…He had been scared.

In the past, Merlin had been betrayed by Nimue, and he'd lashed out at her from bitterness. He shuddered even now, just thinking about the dark animosity he'd felt back then.

He had abandoned himself to his impulses without questioning the reasons behind her actions, cursing her as she apologized through her tears.

I didn't know how I would respond when I confirmed her identity… I didn't know what would come out of my mouth… I was scared that I'd lose my circle of friends I'd worked so hard to get…

So he had remained complicit. He had continued to allow things to remain ambiguous.

By chance, Luna had barged in on them as Nayuki decided to reveal something in their conversation. Things had remained up in the air.

When they decided to postpone their conversation, Rintarou had felt relief.

His own weakness disgusted him.

This happened because I was spineless enough to put things off…!

He gripped his hand hard enough for his fingernails to break skin. Blood started to well out of his palm. His fury was hot enough to fry his brain.

There were a lot of things to consider—and circumstances, too. Too many to count.

Vivian's motives, Nayuki's reasons, Rintarou's secret.

Even if he worked his way through the noise—

I'm getting what I deserve. This is all my fault. That's why I need to fix this myself!

He couldn't get Luna involved in this battle. Call it what you will, Rintarou was heading into a personal struggle, a desperate form of retaliation, revenge, vengeance.

Nayuki wouldn't be coming back. His actions meant nothing, but he didn't stop. He couldn't stop. As if he could ever stop.

"Aaaaaaaaaaah!"

Rintarou pushed through the skyscrapers, flying in between them, before he arrived at one conspicuously larger and newer tower.

It was the city hall, the central department for the administration of the artificial island of Avalonia.

To the trained eye, it was obvious that there was another city hall perfectly overlapping this one—on the underside of the planet, the netherworld.

Those two edifices were divided by the boundaries between the worlds. Normal humans couldn't step over this divide, much less perceive it, but there certainly was a second building there.

And it was plainly visible to Rintarou—

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Crashing down from the sky, Rintarou unsheathed his red and white swords, swinging them into the shape of an X as he jumped into the city hall's entrance.

Boooom!

Glass shattered everywhere. Rintarou's swords broke through the world boundaries that divided the two city halls, letting him slip through to the underside via a fissure.

With his extra momentum, he slid ten yards across the floor, the bottoms of his shoes and his knees scraping from friction.

When he lifted his face, not a single normal employee or human was on the floor that stretched before him…

"Wh-who are you?!"

"How did you get in here?!"

Instead, there was a crowd of gorgeous women wearing the same clothes as Nayuki and Vivian.

The Dame du Lac blinked at Rintarou, their sudden intruder. He staggered to his feet in front of the gaping group.

His voice rumbled, loud enough to reach the pits of hell. "Bring me Vivian."

"…Huh? Wh-what are you…?"

"Isn't she here? Somewhere in this place… Tell her that Rintarou Magami…that Merlin has come to kill her."

It was like all hell broke loose for the Dame du Lac upon hearing his egotistic tone.

"Hey, you… Don't you know this is holy ground? No trespassing! Filthy humans from the outside world aren't allowed entry."

"And you think you'll get to see Lady Vivian? To kill her? Someone's being stupid…!"

"Hyah-ha-ha! Hiiiiiilarious! I bet you have no idea who we are! Hyah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Oh my… It seems like you've got some power, but we're the Dame du Lac—noble beings of half-human, half-fey blood. We're superior to humans. You'll make a fool of yourself if you keep that up."

The Dame du Lac were looking at Rintarou as though he were some clown. They met him with inquisitiveness, contempt, and ridicule.

Rintarou didn't have his eyes set on those ladies—ignoring them and barreling through to the back of the floor.

“Hey…!”

“St-stop right there! Don’t take another step! Consider this your final warning!”

“Outta my way!” Rintarou spat. “I’ve got business with Vivian, that harlot! You might be her minions, but I would prefer not to unnecessarily manhandle any girls. If you don’t want to get hurt, step back.”

Up until this moment, the Dame du Lac had been looking at him with disbelief. Now they changed everything about their attitude and demeanor.

“I guess you need to be taught a lesson or two…”

“Ha-ha-ha! All humans are idiots who don’t know their place!”

They stood in Rintarou’s way and surrounded him.

Seventeen in total. Every single one of them was a proud mage who boasted incredible mana.

Encircled by all this power, despair was the only mood appropriate for this situation.

However, Rintarou didn’t slow his pace at all. Even in this circumstance, he wasn’t interested in a single one of them…

“Oh, well. I won’t actually take your lives. Just go to sleep.”

By acting all superior, he had apparently spoiled their mood.

“It seems someone needs to be punished and taught some damn manners.”

“No need to call in Vivian. We can take care of this on our own.”

“Hee-hee-hee. To think he’ll have to fight on his own against us!”

“You’re just a human. You’re not our enemy.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I’ll go easy on you…but don’t come crying to me if you die.”

With that warning, each of the Dame du Lac boosted her powers and chanted her magic words. A destructive amount of power started to expand in the room—a crushing Aura.

Eventually, their hands unleashed a torrent of blazing flames, a whirling vacuum of sharp blazes, blizzards below freezing, tsunamis, thunder and lightning, and all forces of nature, trying to swallow him whole.

“Hmph. So you’re stupid.”

At that moment, Rintarou made his move. To put it simply, his actions were minimal—clean.

He approached them and swung his swords.

That was it. There were no tricks or illusions.

He kept repeating his movements in a speed beyond human comprehension—seventeen times. In the blink of an eye, he had cut down the seventeen of them.

Fwsht! His swords flashed with a beam of light.

“Gah?!”

“Ahhhh…?!”

A beat later, there was a shock wave, blasting out with force. Screams were barely audible above the roaring wind.

His swords produced a whirlwind, sucking in streaks of blood as the beaten bodies of the Dame du Lac were mercilessly blown away, smashing against the ceiling and walls, rolling across the floor…

"…Hmph."

The place was still. There was no one who could utter a word.

Rintarou whipped his swords through the air. There wasn't a single drop of blood on them from the speed of his attacks. Composed, he left the place behind.

Rintarou walked through the city hall that the Dame du Lac controlled in the netherworld.

He stalked up to the top floor. Many a Dame du Lac attacked him on his trek there, trying to thwart his progress.

"Outta my way."

""""AAAAAAAAH?!""""

A single slash of his sword sliced through the gathering crowd like paper.

With his overwhelming power, Rintarou hacked down all those who were there to keep him from his goal as he continued toward the top floor. He kept climbing up the stairs.

He walked all through the building, trampling over the layers of magic traps underfoot like ants.

No one stopped Rintarou. They couldn't stop him.

No matter how many straw men formed a wall, it was nothing against the heavy armor of a tank.

Witnesses said he'd marched forward like the devil.

In a certain office on the top floor of the city hall in the underworld, Vivian was performing her usual duties.

She was lost in thought as her eyes scanned the documents she'd received from her underlings. They had burrowed their way into the government of every country in the world through its underside.

Hmm… The postindustrial areas—Japan, America, Europe—are doing fine at present.

As for the Middle East…I suppose I'll have them continue their wars to tweak the power balance among their countries, and for economic reasons.

About the drought in the southern region of the northern states… Hmm… We don't have any resources to help them… We'll have to let them be for the time being. Sorry.

Even if the population dips, it won't take long for them to recuperate…

Vivian wrapped up her written commands, determining the general state of the world moving forward.

The shadow leaders in each country were the Dame du Lac. The leaders would follow Vivian's orders when it came to politics and the administration of their countries. They didn't even realize they were being manipulated by magic.

On this day, she would continue to maintain the equilibrium of the world.

Just like that, the Dame du Lac had secretly guided and managed the planet for generations.

…Every once in a while, humans need war. Otherwise, they'll head toward their own decline with no advancements… These children are a handful.

But it seems they've been showing troubling signs—acting in ways beyond our expectations… I'm beginning to hope for the Catastrophe to come sooner…

Vivian sighed.

Outside her office, there were heavy footsteps of someone coming closer…

BAAM! A bloodied girl staggered into the room, clinging onto the door frame, still from shock.

"Emelda? What in the world happened to you?"

"This is bad news! Lady Vivian…! That man…Rinta—!"

CRASH! Someone violently kicked her from behind as she tried to deliver her message. She splayed out on the office floor.

"…What's up, Vivian?"

The one who had appeared behind her was—

"Rintarou Magami—Merlin?!"

Dangling his two swords as his arms hung limply at his sides, he emitted a dark Aura that froze the air around them. The boy fouled the place with his wrath.

Rintarou.

He had made it to the top from the first floor of the building. Not a single wound had been inflicted upon him. His breaths were even… He hadn't killed a single person.

"…Gh! …You've come all this way with that scary face? What's the matter? Can I help you?"

For a moment, her face screwed up in shock, but it took her no time to regain her composure. She held back her emotions with a smile.

"I can't believe you'd march in here without an appointment… And all violent, too… I wish you had more tact and common sense…"

"Haven't got any use for chitchat, you damn tramp."

Rintarou glared at Vivian as he thrust the point of his red sword at her with his right hand.

"This is for Nayuki… This is for Nimue. I'll hear you out if you want to apologize or beg for your life…after I've slit your throat."

He was more furious, more forceful than ever.

Splayed out on the floor, Emelda labored to breathe, shrinking back from his power. Suffocating, she started foaming at the mouth before fainting, eyes rolling to the back of her head.

"…Haah… Why do you know about that, Merlin?"

Vivian stood up from her seat, making her nasty remarks.

“Nayuki Fuyuse… Nimue gave up being human and became part of the Dame du Lac… That was when she departed from the world’s providence, which is why no one would have any memories of her. All traces of her life disappeared, and the world synchronizes for consistency…”

She started to walk quietly, staring at Rintarou as though making a fool of him. She slowly circling him, clockwise, in the expansive office.

“…”

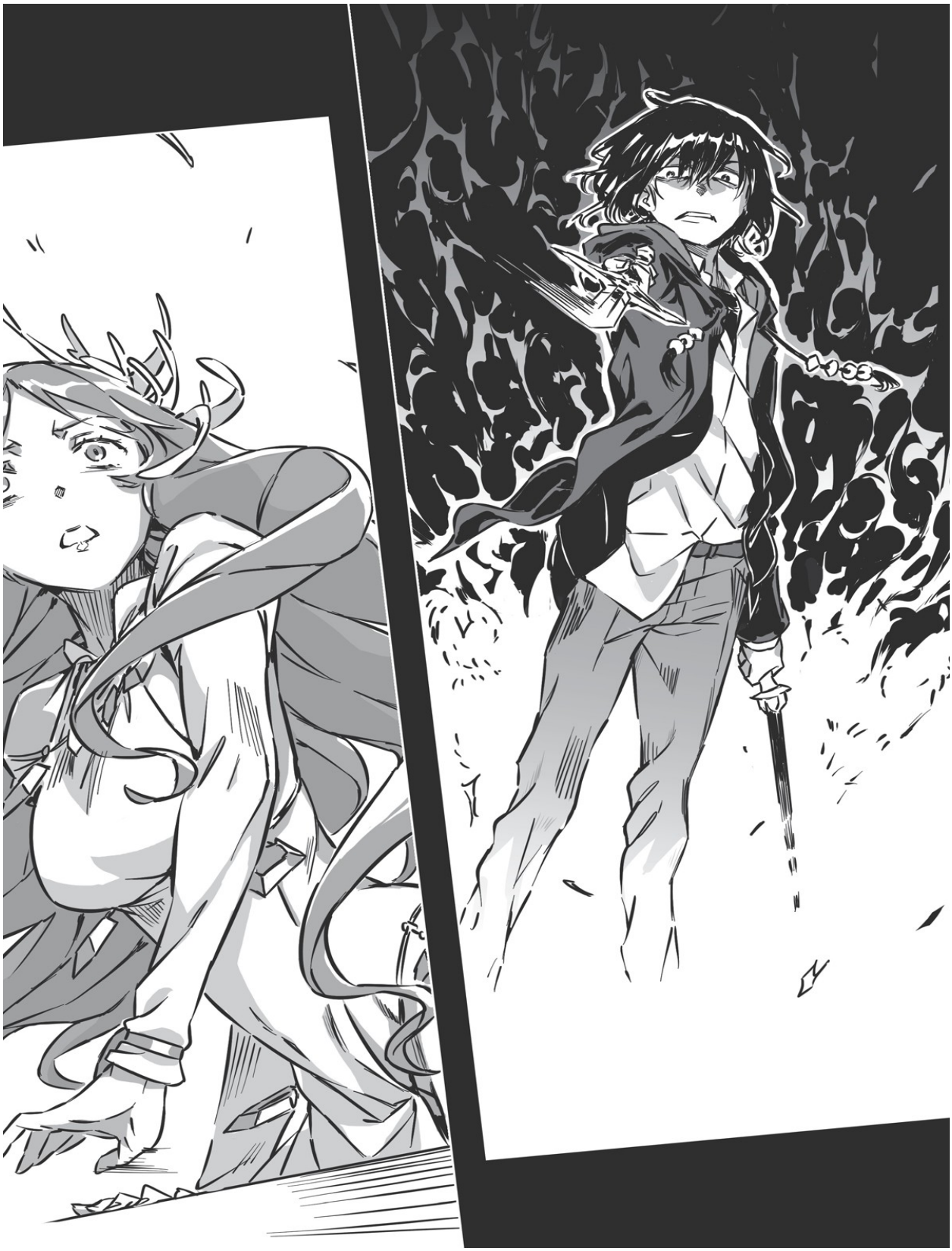
Rintarou kept his swords lowered as he locked onto his target and started stalking through the room with her. He continued to keep a fixed distance from Vivian.

“And you’re seeking vengeance? She should be nothing more than a traitor to you. She’s the detestable person who sealed you away and killed you.”

“…”

Inching across the room, the two continued to pace around in circles.

While maintaining a fixed distance, they kept an eye on each other without lowering their guards…and continued prowling.



“If anything, I would rather you feel grateful that I dealt with that failure.”

“…”

They continued walking.

“Did it bother you? I can understand that. Even among the Dame du Lac, she was the prettiest, of course…and brave and devoted… She was most suitable for satisfying the carnal desires of men… I don’t blame you for losing your temper.”

“…”

…They kept roving.

“Hee-hee-hee. If that’s the case… I can select a random member of the Dame du Lac or two who rival her beauty… I will give them to you as your devoted slaves… What do you think? Would you please put away your swords? Hee-hee-hee…” Vivian chuckled while completely composed…

Suddenly, Rintarou stopped…and snapped at her. “Shut up. Cut out the bullshit. You die here.”

Vivian’s spine locked in place, frozen as if she’d been sliced by an ice blade.

“…Oh, well, it seems I don’t have much of a choice…”

She seemed to not lose any of her composure, looking down at Rintarou as though he were a naughty child.

“Merlin… I planned on dealing with you someday, but…well, this is a good enough opportunity as any.”

“…”

“I will tell you one thing. Do you know why I haven’t done anything to you myself up until now? …That was because you joined King Luna’s group.”

“…”

“The King Arthur Succession Battle is a magical ceremony that necessitates the interweaving of human and human. That means any intervention by the Dame du Lac has adverse effects on the ritual itself, as we are not human… I would like to avoid interference as much as possible… particularly before the search for the four treasures.”

“…”

“However, it seems that constraint has already been lifted. So I will execute you here and now… Are you ready?”

Rintarou had been quiet up until then. “Yeah?” He sounded fed up. “You think you can take me out? What a joke.”

“You always needed to get the last word. Have you forgotten? Even if you were Merlin in a past life, you’re just a human now, after all. And I am the Dame du Lac—not some imitation, but the original ancestor. Between the two of us, there’s an undisputable, vast difference—” Vivian snickered devilishly.

Shing. Ice spears appeared behind Rintarou.

He realized the temperature had dropped to absolute zero. The blood in his body started to solidify.

“Huh?!” Rintarou tried to force himself to move, panicking.

Snap. His *right arm* broke off and fell to the ground.

“Hee-hee-hee. I’m surprised you didn’t notice! I already activated my magic! There is no way someone like you could see through my *Deceit*!”

Rintarou’s hands and legs were enclosed in an iceberg that kept growing bigger before his eyes. His movements had been completely sealed.

“You’ll have all the time in hell to regret your actions—for misunderstanding your place in this world and trying to defy me, Merlin!”

Vivian raised her hands. Ice spears poured over his head like a sudden storm.

CRAAAAAAAAASH! It sounded like glass shattering.

Rintarou’s entire body broke into pieces, scattering on the floor.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! How pitiful!”

It happened right then.

…Thump.

As her cacophonous peals of laughter rang through the room, her right arm…fell to the ground.

“…Huh?”

It was a clean cut through her right elbow that dribbled with blood, dirtying the floor. She realized the office wasn’t chilled from ice spears or frozen in place.

The smashed pieces of Rintarou’s flesh weren’t even on the ground.

Vivian couldn’t process the situation. Next to her, Rintarou wrapped his *right arm* around her shoulders, drawing her closer to whisper in her ear.

“I’m surprised you didn’t notice. I already activated my magic. There is no way that someone like you could see through my *Deceit*.”

She realized Rintarou had already undergone his *Fomorian Transformation*, searing the air with his inhuman Aura.

“Uh… Ah!”

“You were right about one thing… The ‘undisputable, vast difference’ between us.”

Finally, her mind caught up with the situation. “Ah! Gah…! Aaaaaaaaaaaah!”

She cradled her right arm, screeching like a crushed toad.

“Take that!” Rintarou kneed Vivian in the stomach and sent her flying.

The impact ruptured her intestines and broke her spine, annihilating Vivian.

“Gah! Augh! Aaaaaaaaaaah…!”

Her body was blasted sideways through the office, smashing into the wall and bounding back. She hacked up blood, sprawled across the floor.

“…Hey, hey, hey. That’s not even a tenth of the torment you inflicted on Nayuki… Don’t start screaming and making a big deal out of that…”

Rintarou walked calmly toward Vivian, who ungracefully tasted the floor. The swords in his loose grip glinted ominously as he approached.

“Eek! D-don’t come any closer…!”

Vivian had turned white as a sheet, shuddering as she desperately inched back on the ground. As she crawled like a caterpillar, she found herself backed into a smashed wall.

“…” Rintarou looked down at her as though she were trash and approached her, agonizingly slowly.

“Don’t come clooooooser!”

Spurred by her own panic, Vivian released the full strength of her mana. Chanting, she filtered her Aura through her whole body and spirit. Growing in the room was a hellish frost, bigger than any in this battle. The arctic chill glittered, solidifying as swords and a vortex of death that assaulted Rintarou.

Vivian was undoubtedly giving everything to carry this out.

Click! Rintarou snapped his fingers, raising a black fire that burned over his body. Its flames lapped at the room, scorching the arctic frost. It was the Fomorian dark magic *Black Flame*, which burned away magic with its dark blaze.

“What…?” Vivian was in disbelief as this scene burned itself into her eyes.

It was the soles of his feet that were imprinted in her brain next.

Rintarou’s rough front kick hit her like a battering ram square in the face. Pressed between the wall behind her and his foot, her visage was squashed. Her terrific beauty was no longer recognizable.

“Ah! Aaaaaaaah!”

Her nose spouted blood as she used her remaining hand to clutch her swollen face and writhed unattractively on the ground.

M-Merlin…I can’t believe you…?! Vivian’s thoughts went in circles between her screams.

This is unthinkable…! How did you regain this much power?! If this continues, things will go according to the evil god’s plans…! And b-before that happens…I’ll be killed here… No!

She had no strength left in her. It was almost as though her body had fallen apart.

Vivian realized…that she had been completely mistaken.

She was no stranger to Merlin’s powers from the ancient era…which was why she had made Nimue ensnare him when he least expected it. Why in the world had she been so conceited? Where had she gone wrong? Why had she gotten overconfident after outmaneuvering him a single time?

That monster had been downgraded to a human! He shouldn’t have been able to touch someone like her.

“Guess that’s all you amounted to.” Rintarou seethed, unable to hold back his anger and contempt, as he looked down at Vivian. “So a nobody

killed Nayuki, huh…? Shit… Why…? Wh-why couldn't I have…protected her…?!"

Rintarou's rage was directed more at himself than at Vivian.

But it was all too late.

"…I'm going to settle things, Vivian."

He yanked up a fistful of her hair, snapping up her head to make her face him as she squirmed on the ground. He laid his sword against her neck.

"Aaaah?! St-st-stop…"

"Do you think you can stop me? Keep dreaming…"

"I-if you spare me… I—I know! I'll give you the right to have your way with my body for a night…! Th-that should be enough…!"

"As if I want to sleep with a dirty hag like you."

"I-I'm the lynchpin of the King Arthur Succession Battle…! If I die, n-nothing will come of the ritual…! A-are you sure you want to do this…?!"

"That'd be annoying…but I can't forgive you. You'll have all the time in hell to regret laying a hand on my friends…"

Despair dawned on Vivian when Rintarou seemed impervious to her begging.

It was no use. Merlin was intent on killing her.

Though Vivian had been beheaded by Sir Balin in ancient times, he had *only* beheaded her. Only her corporeal body had died.

That was why she had recovered…but she couldn't imagine Merlin would stop there, seeing that he was livid.

There was no mistaking that he would destroy the very concept of Vivian herself.

No… No! I don't want to die! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!

How could she meet her end in this gruesome way? She was supposed to guide the world for eternity as the Dame du Lac! This was impossible! Absurd!

Without minding Vivian, Rintarou attempted to slice his sword through her neck in one breath.

"W-wait! Nayuki… Nimue is still alive…!" Vivian managed to squeak out in desperation.

His hand locked in place before he could move his sword.

"…B-but…i-if I die here……she will forever be…! So let's make a deal…! Will you make a deal with me…?! Ughuh…!"

"Talk," he barked, glaring at her and grabbing her by the collar. She was suspended in midair, his fingers at her throat.

"N-Nimue is still alive… W-we do not die easily… You know this…don't you?"

"Sure, so?"

"I am a genuine half-fey, born between a human and a high-order fairy… but…*cough…*the other Dame du Lac were all originally human… Did you know that…?"

“…Uh-huh.”

“I would take human girls with the proper disposition and assimilate them into my household by turning them into fey… They are artificial half-fey… They each have something that governs their existence called the Fairy Crystal Core…which is inside their bodies…”

“…I knew that, too.”

“Fairies are part of the natural world…which means the Dame du Lac share that same property… Even if they die…they can be restored…as long as their Fairy Crystal Core is alive… even though it might take some time…!”

The blade of Rintarou’s sword bit about an inch into Vivian’s neck. Blood sprayed out of her skin.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Are you playing me for a fool? You think I don’t know you destroyed Nayuki’s Fairy Crystal Core? …You need to die.”

Rintarou was done talking. He braced his hand, swinging up his sword.

“P-please wait! There’s still another way! If you have the Holy Grail!”

“!” He stopped his hand before the blade sliced through her.

“Y-yes…the Holy Grail…one of King Arthur’s four treasures… In the past, it was called the Dagda’s cauldron… It’s a goblet of life that gives the bearer unlimited fortune…! If you just have its ability to create life, you can resuscitate the Fairy Crystal Core and restore her…!”

Rintarou whispered to her. “Really? In other words, the search for the four treasures is going to be announced soon.”

“Y-yes! You’ll have the chance to acquire the Holy Grail!”

Vivian blabbed as though he was right on the mark.

“The King Arthur Succession Battle is a magical ceremony cast on this man-made island of New Avalon…to specifically start the search for the four treasures…!

“This island was made to serve as a place for the ritual… Eleven Kings accompanied by their Jacks would compete, triggering the search for the four treasures…!”

“I see. That’s why we haven’t gotten an official announcement for the quest. Reducing our numbers was part of the ceremony.”

Well, he could accept that. A quest was naturally reserved to the “chosen.”

“In our original plan…we didn’t intend on asking the Kings to search for the Holy Grail…,” Vivian groaned, glaring at Rintarou.

“I knew it. Even Arthur couldn’t get his hands on it. That’s how the legend goes. That means the Kings won’t be able to get their hands on it as his descendants. Even though the quest is for four treasures in name, there’s only three treasures involved in the quest: the Holy Sword, the Holy Spear, and the Holy Stone. That’s my guess… Am I wrong?”

“Y-you’re right… For the Holy Grail, we would immediately stop its quest as soon as it started. That was the arrangement. The Kings would search for

three treasures in effect…and the one with all three would be awarded a replica of the Holy Grail and become the winner of the succession battle… There was no need for the real one, according to our rules."

"A replica, huh?" Rintarou let his shoulders droop in exasperation.

"We had to include a search for the Holy Grail in this ceremony, seeing as there were four treasures in the ancient era backing the kingdom of Logres… However, it was the only treasure King Arthur could not locate. That means it's not required to succeed him…"

"…"

"But we can issue the search for the Holy Grail for this special circumstance—for Nimue's sake! I'll set it up just for you to undertake the quest! I am the main sorceress who controls this magical ceremony…! So please spare my life…!"

Rintarou glared at Vivian.

To be honest…this is stupid. Is her head empty? This isn't a 'deal'…

The quest for the Holy Grail was basically like playing a video game that was impossible to win. Since the Dame du Lac were in charge of giving trials to humans, they didn't go through the trials themselves. They just didn't have the capacity for it. That meant Rintarou needed to try it himself if he wanted to find the Holy Grail.

King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table had attempted it as their last and greatest quest… Many famous knights had wanted the Holy Grail, but…many men didn't return, losing their way on the barren route. The Round Table had been weakened, contributing to the destruction of the kingdom.

There had only been one who had obtained that Holy Grail: the single knight who had cleared the quest… That was the perilous thirteenth seat of the Round Table—Galahad the immaculate paladin.

Though none knew why, Sir Galahad had obtained the treasure, only to return to heaven with it.

Even if Rintarou had been Merlin, securing the Holy Grail was almost impossible.

How could Vivian call this a "deal" when it was predicated on acquiring the unfeasible?

There's a chance this is a trap. She's probably trying to get rid of me by having me go on an absurd trial… If I attempt this, I might never come home…

But…

All I can do…is try.

Nayuki had died thinking of Rintarou.

There was no way he could abandon her… There was no way she could die without being avenged. Even if he ended up six feet under, he needed to save Nayuki. That was the least he could do.

That was why Rintarou loosened his grip on Vivian's neck, letting her body crash onto the floor.

“Yeah, all right. I’ll let you live…”

Rintarou unwillingly spat out, “I’ll attempt the search for the Holy Grail.”

Rintarou left the city hall in the netherworld, returning to the real world.

It was already late at night, darkness cocooning the sleeping city of Avalonia. The main drag was long deserted, and even the light from the decorative lamps was sparse.

Cars occasionally passed on the highway in the distance. The air whistled through the gaps between the skyscrapers.

Rintarou slowly walked through the deserted streets alone.

…Slowly.

……Very slowly.

……..

…Eventually, he left the urban area all together, heading to the outskirts.

The clustered modern buildings gave way to houses made in the British style, as if to recreate an old townscape… He stalked through the streets.

Eventually, he reached Sword Lake Beachside Park in Area Three.

Rintarou sat down on a bench overlooking the panoramic view of the sea, absentmindedly watching the waves. The ocean that stretched before his eyes was pitch-black—eerie.

His head had cooled off. It had been on the verge of exploding ever since he lost Nayuki. Rintarou could finally think clearly again.

“…The quest for the Holy Grail, huh…?”

Distant memories of the legendary era raced through Rintarou’s head.

The kingdom of Logres had been in decline.

After pushing all the blame on King Arthur, the leaders of the nation were reaching their limits, even though these politicians had once been its crowning glory. The secretary of state, Sir Kay, tried desperately to support Arthur, but it had been no use.

To restore the kingdom inching toward collapse, they had undertaken a quest as a last-ditch effort…and that had been the search for the Holy Grail.

They needed to obtain the legendary chalice said to give its holder boundless fortune.

There were four safeguard treasures for the kingdom of Logres required of any king…

The Holy Sword—the Spade that symbolized “royalty.”

The Holy Spear—the Club that symbolized “military.”

The Holy Stone—the Diamond that symbolized the “vassal.”

The Holy Grail—the Heart that symbolized “fortune.”

Because King Arthur had failed to obtain the last one…Logres had lost its fortune. That had been the fatal reason why all its prestige and glory had crumbled away.

Why did the only successful challenger of the quest, Galahad, ascend and take it to heaven? That’s still a mystery to this very day. Can I really get my hands on the Grail?

The only thing he knew for certain was that the trial was a dangerous one. He imagined he'd need to be ready for the possibility that he might never return, based on his current abilities.

It's for Nayuki. I don't mind…but…

The one thing that did concern him was…Luna.

What am I…supposed to tell her?

Vivian had divulged more details afterward, but basically, the quest was to be announced soon. The four trials would be opened at the same time. Only one trial could be attempted by each person…according to the rules of the ceremony.

And since these rules had been decided by magic, they were absolute. They could not be bent in any way.

Naturally, Luna could try for the Holy Sword, the Holy Spear, or the Holy Stone…anything other than the Holy Grail, which was hopeless. If Rintarou attempted its trial, who would protect Luna during his time away?

All the quests will be incredibly dangerous, though there might be some marginal difference in difficulty. It's crucial that I protect her right now. I vowed I'd make her king…And I want to see her on the throne…

If he stuck by Luna, he wouldn't be able to save Nayuki.

If he attempted the quest, he wouldn't be able to save Luna as she participated in another trial.

In other words, I need to pick between Nayuki and Luna…

He had to decide to go with one of them. This was the ultimate choice.

Maybe…Luna would be able to zip through the trial and obtain some sort of treasure… Let's say that's the case. To save Nayuki, I would need to…

Wishful thinking.

No. We've gotten this far. The trial won't be easy. What will I do if Luna dies in my absence? If I want Luna to win, then I need to go with her… I have to abandon Nayuki…

He took on a more pessimistic attitude.

Who am I kidding?! Abandon her?! How could I desert…someone who went that far for me?! That would be senseless! But…

Pitting those two things together, his thoughts wound up in circles. He never arrived at a conclusion.

Maybe I'm losing my nerve…? Maybe I'm using Luna as an excuse to avoid the quest for the Holy Grail…? Dammit… That's not how it should be…! But…!

His beliefs became a jumbled mess in his brain.

He wished he could just throw in the towel, tear apart Vivian, and decimate everything… He was desperately trying to hold back his destructive impulses.

…He kept thinking, but it always came down to choosing one and deserting the other. Luna and Nayuki had both been a big part of his life.

Dammit… What am I supposed to do…? What am I…supposed to do…?

Rintarou pulled out a small leather bag from his chest pocket and stared at it.

It contained Nayuki's broken Fairy Crystal Core, which he'd recovered from Vivian.

…Nayuki… What should I do…?

His eyes bored into it, waiting for the answer.

I'm sure…you would tell me not to think of you and to help Luna…but I…

Rintarou sat on the bench, still as a statue.

…How much time had passed?

SHRF! Someone crunched fallen leaves underfoot, marking their arrival.

"…Rintarou."

He jerked up his head.

It was Luna.

"Luna? You…"

"You little imp!" Luna lunged at Rintarou and grabbed his collar, shaking him violently, staring into his eyes from point-blank range. "You're so stupid! You stood me up and broke your promise! Where did you go? Do you have a death wish? Do you want capital punishment? Answer me!"

"…What promise?"

He finally remembered it when she brought it up.

"After I'm finished for the day, I'll grant you the privilege of going on a date with me at a café! Your treat! What do you think?! I bet you can't wait!

"Sounds good! I need to wrap up the last thing on my schedule! Wait for me. If you leave before me, it's capital punishment for you!"

"…Oh, right… Come to think of it, we did talk about that… Sorry…"

"And why are you ignoring my calls?! I called you a million times! If you're alive, pick up the phone and tell me! I was so worried something happened to you! Gosh!"

Rintarou shuffled his smartphone out of his pocket and looked at it.

He had a dreadful number of text messages and missed calls in his history.

He realized her whole body was drenched in sweat as she interrogated him. Her hair was disheveled, and her makeup was a mess. Her breaths were ragged. And her knees were knocking together slightly, possibly because of fatigue.

She must have been sprinting around the entire city looking for him.

He scrutinized her face. She didn't look like she was scowling from anger, but her eyes were tearing up slightly at their corners… He got a sense that she was more relieved than mad.

"Sure! You're so strong, and everything I do gets in your way! I didn't think something weird would happen to you of all people! But we're in the middle of a war! If you disappear without a word, I get worried that you've been killed by someone! Do you get that?! You…!"

Thud, thud, thud. Luna punched Rintarou in his ribs.

She wasn't putting her weight into it, but it hurt a little.

“…Sorry… I’m really sorry for making you worry…”

“Hmm?! Someone’s being decent today! It’s fine—as long as you get it! As punishment, you’re going to treat me to every type of cake available at Café du Soleil!”

“…Yeah…all right…”

Luna started fiddling with her phone, ignoring him. It seemed she was sending out messages to Emma, Sir Kay, Felicia, and Sir Gawain that she had located Rintarou or something. Apparently, the others were searching for him in the city. His behavior must have caused great concern.

…What am I doing…?

“Haah…,” Rintarou sighed, dark and gloomy.

“……Rintarou… What’s the matter with you?” She peeked into his face, finished firing off her messages. “You’ve been acting weird today… Did something happen?”

“…It’s nothing.” Rintarou turned his back on Luna and started walking.

He was frustrated that he was so pathetic. He was so indecisive, hesitating even though he’d let hell loose on Vivian. Rintarou’s shoulders dropped as he trudged back.

“Hey, Rintarou—” Luna came around in front of him, flashing him a smile and linking her arm in his. “HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

She wrapped his arm under her side, swiftly did a half turn, lifted Rintarou onto her back, and flung him to the ground. Luna used all her body weight to throw him down.

“Aaaaaaaah?! Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!” he screeched, surprised.

She entwined her supple legs in his arms and flopped onto him, planting both her feet on top of him.

“Gwah?!”

He hadn’t been prepared for Luna’s arm lock because she had caught him by surprise.

“Heh-heh! You might be strong, but there’s no way you can escape when I’ve got you in a perfect lock. Right?”

Wai—hey! What do you think you’re suddenly—YOW!

Luna mercilessly constricted his arm, making his bones creak. Her thick thighs from under her miniskirt suffocated the bottom of his face, muffling his words.

“Mmm-gh-mhm?!”

“Why do you look like you’re some martyr, shouldering the burden by yourself? I’m your lord! That insolent attitude ticks me off! Okay! Spit it out! I’ll hear you out as your King!”

“Ngh-mhm-mmm?!”

“Tch… I take it you’re not going to talk? Fine! Be that way! I’ll twist your arm until you’re in the mood to spit it out. Heh-heh-heh. If you want to escape in one piece, you better speak up!”

“Mh-gaaaaaaaaah!”

He couldn’t talk because she was covering his mouth! He was this close to suffocating!

Rintarou’s desperation didn’t get through to Luna…and their grappling continued until he was on the brink of fainting.

“Were. You. Trying. To. Kill. Me?”

“I—I said I’m sorry…”

They had finally settled down.

Luna was apologetic, perched on the bench next to Rintarou, who refused to even look at her.

“…So? What happened?” She pouted. “I can’t believe you’d look so bad when you claim to be overpowered and have the biggest ego under the sun! …Something must have happened! Tell me.”

“……” Rintarou maintained his silence.

After all, Nayuki Fuyuse had been completely erased from Luna’s memories.

How was he supposed to explain himself? One slip of the tongue and she’d think he’d lost his grip on reality.

The problem was, Luna wasn’t the type to stay out of it, if she could help it. That was why he was trying to think of a way to keep Luna off his case.

Luna’s arms stretched out, latching onto his cheeks and sandwiching them between her palms. She forced him to look at her, bringing their faces close enough to feel their hot breaths.

“…Is that how little trust you have in me?”

“!”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t have to. I won’t ask about it anymore. But I don’t want you to lie to my face and pass it off as something else.”

It seemed she had seen through him.

“I’m a king. I might seem happy-go-lucky and unreliable…but I’m still your lord. I want my vassals to be honest with me. What about you? Am I really that worthless of a king to you?”

She looked at him with unusual sincerity and honesty. It was almost as though she was testing him.

He couldn’t hold out if she was coming at him with such directness.

“…All right. I’ll talk… But you might not believe me.”

He finally resigned himself. Rintarou explained one segment at a time, starting from the beginning.

“Hey, Luna… We used to have a friend called Nayuki Fuyuse… But you might not remember her anymore…”

“‘Nayuki Fuyuse’…? The one you mentioned this afternoon…?”

Rintarou talked…about Nayuki—all the fun times they’d shared, the battle when she’d saved them… He explained how he felt they were indebted to her.

“…It’s hard to believe. I can’t believe I would forget someone so important to me… I don’t want to believe that or accept it,” Luna muttered, looking into the distance with an inscrutable expression.

“Well, that’s normal…” It didn’t stop him from continuing…

“…Hmm? It seems Nayuki Fuyuse and you—Nimue and Merlin—share some history…huh…?”

“Yeah. When she betrayed me…I wanted to curse her—kill her. I’m still affected by those incidents in my past life. Apparently, she had her own reasons. In her own way, she was working to atone for her sins and save the world…even while I was acting like some teenage rebel.”

Rintarou went into detail—that Nayuki had been executed by Vivian, that he’d raided the Dame du Lac’s headquarters on his own.

He talked about the way to resuscitate Nayuki and that the quest for the four treasures would officially commence soon. He gave specifics about the hunt for the Holy Grail—a quest that, once attempted, was almost impossible to return from.

To save Nayuki, he would need to get this piece of treasure by going through this trial.

Without hiding anything, he put it all out there in plain words.

“…”

“…”

Luna must have guessed why Rintarou was going to participate in this quest. She must have gotten a read on his hesitation. The silence was almost suffocating.

“…Can I ask you two questions?” Luna blurted out as if she couldn’t stand it anymore. “First, what is Nayuki to you? So you were lovers in your past life… But do you like Nayuki?”

“If I’m being honest…it’s a little different. In a general sense, I’m different from the past version of me. Merlin was definitely into Nimue, which was enough to influence me to loathe her in the present. But I’ve only met Nayuki recently… I haven’t fallen head over heels for her. Call me wishy-washy or indecisive. Maybe I’ll fall in love with her in the future.”

He stopped, reflecting on everything that had led up to this point. “But… I had fun when we all hung out—you, me, Sir Kay, Emma…Felicia and Gawain, those loony guys…and Nayuki… I can’t stand someone missing from our group…”

“…I see. Second question. What do you want to do, Rintarou?”

“…I…”

“Answer me honestly. Ignore all the irrelevant factors, like how you’re refusing to leave me to my own devices, or constantly fretting over me, or needing to commit to your duties as my vassal, or paying back your debt to Nayuki, or addressing your guilt at not being able to save her, or trying to atone, or engaging in the impossible game of finding the Holy Grail, or fixating on whatever happened between Merlin and Nimue, etcetera, etcetera!”

“…Uh!” Her firm scolding got him right in the heart.

It was like his jumbled and inconclusive thoughts had been cleared away.

“What does the real Rintarou Magami want to do? Answer me. That’s a royal order.”

Luna’s eyes peered into his soul.

“I—I…”

It felt like everything he’d been holding inside his heart—all the pretenses and chains—melted away when he looked into her beautiful, honest eyes.

In the end, there was only one thing left in his heart.

“…Even if it’s impossible…I want to save Nayuki. Even if she’s been forgotten by everyone…and I’m the only one who remembers her…she’s our important friend…”

“…”

Time passed. They observed each other up close.

“…Bwah-hah!” Luna sputtered out, unable to contain her laughter any longer.

“H-hey…”

“Ha-ha-ha…! Ha-ha-ha…! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What the heck?”

She clutched her stomach as she shrieked with laughter, as if she thought it was the funniest thing in the world.

Rintarou looked at her with narrowed eyes as he came back to his senses.

I guess I should have expected this. It’s not like Luna remembers Nayuki. She must think these are some cringey delusions…

He had been hopeful…because it was Luna. He sighed, slightly disappointed.

“Geez! Is that what’s been plaguing you? You looked like you were killing yourself inside, but it seems like you’ve already made up your mind!”

She gave his back a few hearty slaps. “Then go on the quest! You have to save Nayuki! Okay?”

“Wai—you—” Rintarou blinked at her, doubting his ears. “Don’t you see? If I prioritize Nayuki and go on this trial, that means I can’t help you!”

“Oh, that’ll be fine. I’ll just go on the quest with you.”

“Come again?!” He gaped at her, jaw dropping to the ground. “You weren’t listening to me at all! Do you even understand how dangerous this is?!”

“Oh, I get it. I do.”

“And you don’t even need the Holy Grail to become the winner of the succession battle! This quest is meaningless to you! If you want to win, you would be better off doing another treasure quest!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know all that.”

“And you don’t even remember Nayuki! Why would you go out of your way to—”

“She’s your important friend, right? Then that makes her my precious vassal.”

“Huh?!”

“I might not be able to remember Nayuki Fuyuse…but you’re so serious. If she’s in our friend group, there’s no reason for me to doubt you. So I believe you—obviously! After all, I trust my irreplaceable vassal!”

Rintarou couldn’t close his gaping mouth.

“D-don’t you…get it…?” he muttered, as though it were his final objection. “That Holy Grail is something even King Arthur wasn’t able to get his hands on… Do you really think we can find it…?”

“Oh, that’s odd,” Luna snapped back. “Why wouldn’t we be able to obtain something he failed to get? What? You think less of me than King Arthur?”

“……Gh!”

“I’m going to become a true king! That means I’ll surpass Arthur, too! If I can’t conquer this quest, how could I be crowned as king?”

He was at a loss for words. “…Huh. That’s right. That’s the kind of person you are.”

All he could do now was laugh.

He had forgotten…the personality of the girl who he was attempting to make king, who he wanted to see crowned with his own two eyes.

“Okay, Rintarou! We need to get home ASAP! First, we get some sustenance, then we have a strategy meeting!”

“…Right.” He took the hand Luna offered him and stood up.

Together, they marched back to their base…walking toward Logres Manor.

On the way…

“Oh, let me say this one thing, Rintarou.” She turned to him next to her, strolling through the streets at night. “I don’t plan to lose to this ‘Nayuki’ girl.”

“…Huh? What’s that supposed to mean…?”

“Who knows?!” She flashed him a fearless grin, seeming gleeful.

Her pearly smile seemed to gleam under the faint moonlight.

…

“I see… That’s your choice, Luna.”

In the lounge in Logres Manor, Felicia had just offered her opinion with a somber expression, accompanied by Sir Gawain.

“Rintarou and I are going to attempt the quest for the Holy Grail in the upcoming treasure hunt,” Luna answered brazenly, looking straight at her.

It was already late enough into the night that it was the start of a new day.

A short while ago, the messengers of the Dame du Lac (with bodies basically mummified in bandages) had swung by Logres Manor to announce the start of the treasure hunt.

Sure enough, they only announced the quest for three: the Holy Sword, the Holy Spear, and the Holy Stone.

"How could you call it a search for four treasures when you're only announcing three?" Felicia had pointed out, but the Dame du Lac had evaded her question.

This only confirmed the information Rintarou had brought back earlier.

"It's unfortunate I can't remember a 'Nayuki Fuyuse'… Neither can you, Luna. And yet you're attempting to save her, right?"

"Uh-huh. I'm going to believe Rintarou. I have faith that she was someone important and irreplaceable. Which means it's a King's duty to save her!"

"You can be so clumsy… Don't you know this quest will be dangerous? You might never come back."

"I know."

"And you don't even need it to succeed King Arthur. Undertaking the search when you have the larger goal of becoming king could work to your disadvantage. It won't be beneficial to you at all. Don't you get it?"

"Obviously. But I can't avoid this and keep going. I need to protect my vassals…my friends. That's my royal road. If I withdraw here, then I wouldn't be true to myself anymore," Luna declared without hesitation.

Felicia stared at her as if to root through the deep recesses of her brain. Eventually, she spoke up again. "…I understand. If you're that prepared to head into certain death, there's nothing more I can say."

"Felicia…"

"…You must complete the quest. And bring back 'Nayuki.' I want us to all reunite…and enjoy a tea party, Luna."

"…Yeah."

Luna's heart was flooded with emotion when she heard these words of encouragement from her childhood friend, one who had quarreled and bickered with her on many occasions.

Felicia turned to Rintarou and bowed her head. "Rintarou…please…take care of my friend."

"Leave it to me."

"I apologize, but I must…" Felicia trailed off, about to reveal the uncomfortable decision she had made.

"We know, Felicia," Luna interrupted, as if to stop her.

After careful deliberation, Felicia had decided to participate in the normal treasure hunt. In other words, her road from here on out would be different from Luna's.

"You're trying to become King for your own reasons and beliefs, too. To attempt the Holy Grail quest and save Nayuki is my own choice. It has nothing to do with you. We don't need to work together. We were always on

equal footing in our alliance. We're not in a master-servant relationship. You… You need to walk your own path."

"Thank you."

They smiled gently at each other.

"Heh… You claim to be equals, but you're basically Luna's dependents."

"I—I thought you promised not to mention that, Rintarou…" Sir Gawain's cheek twitched.

Rintarou smiled sardonically. "Well, that's that. It's a good chance to show off your knightliness, Gawain. This time, you literally need to protect your lord."

"I know."

Rintarou and Sir Gawain grinned at each other.

In the corner of the lounge, Sir Kay seemed to have decided on something as she approached Luna…where she got down on one knee.

"Huh?! Sir Kay?! Wh-what's gotten into you?!"

"Excuse me for being impolite, but I need to ask you something, my lord!" Sir Kay prostrated herself as she implored Luna. "Please…take me on the quest for the Holy Grail!"

"…Huh?"

"I know…! I'm weak! I am not a Jack who can actually protect you! You only need Merlin—Rintarou. I know that! But please! Take me with you! It is with a heavy heart that I admit I am a burden! But I still want to protect you! Please…!" Sir Kay pleaded.

Luna blinked in confusion.

Eventually, Rintarou and Luna both sighed.

"Well… Who said we were leaving you behind…?" Rintarou grumbled.

"…Huh…? Well, but…"

"That's right! You're my Jack, Sir Kay! Of course I'd bring you!"

"B-but…my abilities are…!"

"You're so annoying! Quit whining! That's a royal order! If you said you didn't want to go, I would've put a rope on your neck and dragged you anyway!"

"L-Luna…"

Tears welled up in Sir Kay's eyes before she grabbed Luna in a bear hug, sobbing.

"Th-thank you, Lunaaa… I'm going to try my best… I'll definitely protect you…! I swear on it, even if it means my life…! *Sniffle*!"

"AaaaahhHHHHHH?! You're suffocating me! Let go!"

Rintarou smiled wryly as he watched the two.

…I hate to say it, but this is the most dangerous of all treasure hunts. This is out of Sir Kay's league. That's just the grim truth. It would be wise to leave her behind if we're thinking about increasing our success rate for the mission…

This was the rational decision of King Arthur's past staff officer Merlin.

But even the strongest knight of the Round Table—Lancelot—couldn't complete this quest, let alone Arthur… Maybe we need something other than raw power…

Rintarou watched Sir Kay from behind.

…Well, the cards will fall as they may. Even if Merlin would think of Sir Kay as dead weight, I've got my own opinions…and I'm happy that she's coming.

He smiled dryly.

"…I see… Everyone is leaving…" Emma seemed wistful next to him. "I feel so upset in these situations… I lost my qualification as a King. All I can do…is wait for your return…"

"…Emma."

"I only have one thing to say. Please…please come home safe… I will be waiting…I'll be here…!"

"……"

He observed her begging them to return before he looked around the faces of everyone in the room.

Eventually, Rintarou tousled her hair and smiled gently.

"Wait for us. Keep an eye on our place… We'll be on different paths for a while, but…this is the place where we'll return."

"…Rintarou?"

"Let's all make it back here and hang out together again."

It wasn't just Rintarou.

Luna, Sir Kay, Felicia, and Sir Gawain smiled tenderly as they silently agreed with him.

Had she been there, Nayuki would have felt the same.

"…Got it?"

"Rintarou…! I'll be waiting!" Tears welled up in the corners of Emma's eyes as a smile spread over her lips.

Luna pushed in between them with a ghoulish expression. "Hey, Rintarou? Quick question: Did you just say something super-cringey?"

"Wai—you?!"

"'This is the place where we'll return'? …Aaah! Wow! You're one cool guy! That's so cliché!"

"Gaaaaaaaah! Stooooop!" Rintarou exploded in anger when she teased him—just like always.

"Eeeeeeeek! No roughhousing indoors! Who do you think cleans things up?!"

"Oh, well."

"Ha-ha-ha. This is just our M.O."

Just as usual, Sir Kay seemed powerless. Felicia shrugged, giving up on everything. Sir Gawain approved with a dry smile.

"Wai—ow, ow, ow, ow, ow?! Rintarou?! Tap out! Tap out!"

Night at Logres Manor wore on.

The search for the four treasures had been announced.

The King Arthur Succession Battle was nearing its conclusion, approaching a momentous turning point.

CHAPTER 3

The Commencement of the Search for the Four Treasures

The edges of the scenic lakeshore were packed by dense forest. Clear waters stretched as far as the eye could see. Wind rustled through the trees, sunlight spilling through the leaves. The birds warbled.

At the shore of the lake, time slowed to a crawl. A single woman dabbled in the water.

Her pale body was nude, curving under the light of the sun. Vivian sat with her legs to the side in the shallow end of the lake as she combed through her dripping hair.

This was her netherworld.

Here, she was healing the wounds she had received from Rintarou. At present, her right arm had regenerated, and the reflective surface of the water mirrored her original face, transcendentally beautiful. Not a single wound scarred her body.

This was the Vivian who had recovered from a severed head in the past. This was easy for her.

Even if she healed her physical wounds, though…the insult and injury to her psyche was irreparable.

Splosh! Vivian smacked her reflection on the water's surface, suddenly losing her temper.

"Merlin…! Rintarou Magami…! How dare you…! How dare you disgrace me…! I am the ruler of the world… I cannot forgive you…!"

Even though hate was her primary emotion, Vivian was paralyzed with fear that seemed to seize her heart when she thought about him. Her breaths grew ragged, and she was soon hyperventilating. Her body shook uncontrollably. She went limp.

Even though she seemed to seethe with rage, Vivian had received major psychological damage. Rintarou had already defeated her mind.

That truth vexed her so much that Vivian's facade hideously contorted as fat tears rolled down her face.

"But…Merlin is foolishly attempting the quest for the Holy Grail…! He'll never make it back alive…! Only Galahad ever succeeded in making it out of this trial alive…! Ha-ha-ha! He'll die! He has to! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Splash! Splash! Splash! While crying, Vivian continued to violently strike the water.

“And…on the off chance that he does obtain the Holy Grail… Hee-hee-hee… Ha-ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” She shrieked with laughter, smacking the lake surface.

“Die, Merlin, die! And regret your outrageous actions against me in your final moments on earth! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Her laugh pealed along the tranquil shore.

It was a beautiful scene at odds with the cacophony of her cackle.

At that point, Vivian might have already been broken.

It was a private room, pure white.

Resting on her side in a bed with ivory sheets was a woman about midway through her twenties. She was a black-haired, ethereal beauty—but thin, gaunt, and pale as though she was ill. Her eyes stared into empty space without any emotion. It was almost as though she was devoid of life, with no will to live.

This corpse of a woman remained on the bed, looking at the shadowy streets outside the window, dark as the bottom of the deep sea.

Knock, knock, knock… Someone was at the door.

“…? Come in…?”

Visiting hours were already over. Who could it be? She let them in, though she was immediately on edge.

“Excuse me, Kotone.”

Then, the door opened with a click, allowing a man to quietly enter the room. He was slim and tall in a well-tailored suit and tasteful glasses. He had a gentle face.

As soon as she saw him, she clutched her hand over her mouth, opening her eyes wide. Life started to return to her gaze, and tears flowed from them as though to prove the girl wasn’t dead…

“S-Souma?! It can’t be…! …Is that you, Souma…?!”

The man who had appeared in front of her was Souma Gloria Kujou. He was one of the Kings participating in the succession battle.

“I apologize for coming so late in the evening…Kotone.” Souma walked to Kotone’s side.

She struggled to sit up in her bed, grasping onto Kujou while crying.

“Where have you been…?! I was worried sick about you…! You were missing…! No one had seen you…and I was so frightened that you had died all alone…! *Sniffle*…!”

“…I’m sorry I troubled you. Because of many circumstances, I was unable to do anything.” Kujou waited for Kotone to calm down. “Please cheer up. I’ve finally managed to find a cure for your sickness.”

“Huh? But the doctors said I was incurable… I don’t have much time…”

“Don’t worry. I’ll save you.” He tenderly released himself from Kotone’s grasp and stood up. “I’m going to be a little busy with that. I might not be able to come see you again for a while.”

“Souma…?”

“I will definitely save you… For certain. No matter what. No matter who stands in my path. No matter what price there is to pay. I will risk my life—”

He cut himself off midsentence. Kujou turned his back on Kotone and attempted to leave the room.

She called out to him. “Souma!”

“…What is it?” He stopped, turning around.

“Um…Souma… Are you sure you’re not forcing yourself to do anything extreme?”

“Anything…extreme?”

“No, it’s just… It seemed like… I’m sorry…”

“…”

“Um…please, don’t go out of your way for me… I’m just happy enough that you’re in my life…so…”

Souma stood there without saying anything for a while.

“…You’re doing your health no favors by staying up late… Goodnight.”

With that, he quietly left the hospital room.

“Hee-hee-hee… I’m not *not* a fan of this type of thing…”

Upon leaving Kotone’s room, Souma met up with the people waiting in the back courtyard of Central Avalonia General Hospital.

It was Morgan and Kujou’s Jack, Sir Lancelot.

“Throwing away everything for the love of your life… I’m a fan.”

“Hmph. Stop pretending, witch,” Souma barked. There were no traces of his kind expression from when he had met Kotone earlier.

At that moment, his face was cold and cruel, like that of an entirely different person.

“As you already know, I did everything in my power to keep her alive. To extend her life even for a few moments, I sacrificed the lives of many innocent people. I searched for a secret medicine that could work against her illness, even going as far as to steal it and kill the owner.

“Then, I sought to become King Arthur to save her… I couldn’t accept the possibility of defeat, so I decided my strategy would be to kill everyone. I decided to destroy anything that stood in my way for her sake.”

Kujou suddenly pulled out his Excalibur and looked at its blade. The Military Conquest Steel Sword—the Excalibur surpassed all others, able to trample and overpower anything.

“I have already strayed from the human path. My hands are red from the blood of others. Souma Kujou—the human—died as soon as he killed the first person for her. I am nothing more than what remains…an ugly monster. Ha…! I dare you to laugh at the stupidity of humankind, witch.”

“No. I understand the act of doing something for the one you love… though you might not believe me.”

Kujou didn’t reply to Morgan, looking at her with a blank expression.

She wore the bewitching smile of a man-eater… He couldn’t tell what she really meant by her words.

“But…even if you do win the succession battle…Lady Kotone won’t be saved. I imagine you understand?”

“Yes, her illness doesn’t come from flesh. It’s caused by the existence of a concept.”

“By fate, her blood is the concentrated manifestation of an old spirit… Call it hereditary ancestral restoration. She should be living on the other side of the Curtain of Consciousness…in the illusory world. Her body shouldn’t last long in the real world.

“If you win and succeed King Arthur after obtaining the four treasures, you could only grant her a slower death by using the Holy Grail… Don’t you get it?”

“…”

For a while, silence settled over the three of them.

“…Will you work with me, Master Kujou? I believe our interests are aligned.”

Eventually, Souma replied. “Inevitably.” His mouth warped into a smile as he laughed. “Even if I’m plunged to the pit of hell, even if it means I can’t be by Kotone’s side anymore… I want her to keep living. Maybe it’s my ego talking. I can’t go back on it anymore. The point of no return is long past… All I can do is free fall.”

“I knew you would say that.” Morgan nodded, looking satisfied.

Souma turned to Sir Lancelot. “I’ve always been this type of King. I’d team up with a witch to revolt against the world for a single woman… And I will remove myself from the succession battle.”

“…” Sir Lancelot silently continued to stare at Souma.

“Feeling despondent? You’re a knight among knights. If you can no longer wield your sword in my name, it won’t bother me. You may return to Camlann Hill. I won’t stop you.”

“…That’s impossible. You are my king in this generation. I will accompany you until my last moment,” Sir Lancelot murmured. “…If you don’t mind me saying so, I think I understand your feelings. I ran past battlefields for the sake of a woman, too. Even when it meant the destruction of the country…”

“…Hmm, someone’s impulsive. Well, do as you please,” he replied.

“Now… Let’s get to work. From ages past, fate has been building up to this moment—ready to bloom into a flower. After this search for the four treasures, this man-made island will be engulfed in a chaotic storm that it will never recover from. Enjoy observing the end of the cursed King Arthur Succession Battle, spectators,” Morgan said.

And with that, they began their work.

On that day, all the Kings in the King Arthur Succession Battle had been summoned, heading to a certain place—Area Nine of the man-made island of New Avalon. The tourist spot had been set up along the coastline.

The man-made shore was not at all inferior in beauty to a natural one, outfitted with a beachside resort. The streets resembled the remote

countryside in England, dignified and charming. In recent years, the resort had been celebrated, bustling with abundant sightseers who visited from around the world.

Rintarou had arrived at Area Nine with the others.

“Doesn’t this place kind of look like Winchester in England?” Luna mumbled, strolling through the streets.

“Is this where they’re hosting the treasure hunt…?” Felicia inspected the area.

“You’re not off the mark,” Rintarou said to Luna. “The blueprint was a miniature version of the British Isles, though it’s not super-obvious.”

“Really?” Sir Kay blinked back at him.

“If the whole island was modeled off Britain, Area Nine is right where Winchester would be. Scholars in the modern era say King Arthur’s castle was located in Winchester… If they went out of their way to reproduce it, it’s greater proof that this island is part of some magic ceremony.”

They had reached the designated location, where a castle-like facade appeared in front of them.

The New Great Hall.

The party stepped foot onto the premises of the building, heading indoors from the main entrance. A reception hall greeted them. The very back wall displayed something…

“Is that…the Round Table?!”

“No, Sir Gawain. It appears to be a replica.” Felicia headed toward it, accompanied by her surprised knight.

Visitors who had arrived before them were already gathered in front of the decorative table.

“…Huh?!”

There was a timid Japanese girl a bit younger than Luna and Felicia.

“…It’s okay, Nanami. I’m with you.”

A young black-haired knight seemed to stand over her, protecting her.

“…”

There was a beautiful Russian girl with silver eyes and silver hair who seemed wary of them. Her entire body was covered in what looked like impenetrable special forces equipment…

“Huh? You’re…”

Standing next to her was a dark and alluringly handsome young man wearing a chic turban around his head.

“Sir Kay… Is that…?”

“Yes, I know them. The youthful male knight with the black hair is Sir Perceval. The dark-skinned Saracen knight is Sir Palamedes. Makes sense. Both are incredibly strong.”

Sir Perceval had been the closest friend of Sir Galahad, who had succeeded in the quest for the Holy Grail. He had accompanied Sir Galahad on the journey. Though he had not been able to return…his unadulterated

skills, which bordered on cheating, made him the prodigal knight of the Round Table. It was said that he couldn't even be outdone by Sir Galahad.

Sir Palamedes was forever the rival of Sir Tristan, a cornerstone of the three strongest knights of the Round Table. Though Sir Tristan had won in the end, they had fought on par with each other many times. Had Sir Tristan made a single misstep, Sir Palamedes might have been named as one of the three strongest knights over him.

"I see. It seems we have no lack of opponents." Felicia tried to stand firmly on her feet, nervous to be in the room. Suddenly, she felt the presence of someone behind her.

"Huh?! Aren't you—?!"

"Yo! Long time no see!"

"…Hmph."

The two-person group that had newly arrived at the front entrance was… Reika Tsukuyomi—Sir Mordred—and Sir Dinadan.

"…So you're here, too," Rintarou muttered, glaring.

Ignoring him, Sir Mordred wordlessly walked past.

"Oh, sorry, Merlin. She might not show it, but Mor is actually nervous… I hope you can understand." Sir Dinadan smiled ingratiatingly, following her.

"Sh-shut up! Don't spill any unnecessary details!"

"All right, all right."

It seemed the two of them were back to their usual selves.

"It's been a long time, sir."

"It's great to see you. I knew you'd make it out, Sir Perceval. But I'm surprised…I can understand Sir Gawain, but Sir Kay… You're still here? That's a miracle."

"Y-you've got as big a mouth as always, Sir Palamedes…!"

"I can thank you for that. I have something I need to get done. I can't lose."

"Hmm? Sir Gawain… You seem different somehow."

"But it is strange, sirs. Where is Sir Lancelot? Sir Lamorak? Sir Tristan? The three strongest knights of the Round Table seem to still be missing. I'm concerned…"

"Th-that's because…"

The Jacks rekindled old friendships among themselves.

"Welcome. Come in, Kings."

At some point, four women had come to stand in a line under the replica of the Round Table decorating the wall.

"I am Elaine, the daughter of a certain wild knight who shattered a king's sword. I will be your guide in the search for the Holy Sword."

"I am Lyle, who had the sword of the most virtuous knight stolen from her by a certain savage knight. I will be your guide in the search for the Holy Spear."

"I am Niniane, the one who made a feared beast's revelation about the king come true. I will be your guide in the search for the Holy Stone."

The women introduced themselves.

"…The Queens…have finally arrived…" Felicia stared at the three women.

"They're all characters from the stories revolving around the treasures. The whole succession battle up until now must have been a ceremony to summon them," Rintarou concluded.

The three women started speaking.

"Starting hence, we will impose a trial on each of you."

"We share deep-seated ties with the Holy Sword, Holy Spear, and Holy Stone."

"Each of those treasures slumbers deep beyond the other side of the Curtain of Consciousness—in the Illusory World."

"Through the psychic scenery that has been left in our souls—through the netherworld that exists in our abysses—you will journey to obtain the treasures that slumber in the Illusory World."

"Please take care as you attempt these trials…"

Sir Palamedes raised his hand. "Just a moment, my fair ladies. Based on what has been said, the conditions to bring forth the treasure hunt had been for six Kings to remain, but there are only five here."

"…"

The Dame du Lac were silent.

"Come to think of it, that's been bothering me…," Felicia whispered to Sir Gawain.

"Does that mean there's a King out there who decided to pass on the treasure search?"

"But…who would go out of their way to give themselves that disadvantage…?"

Sir Palamedes continued in their periphery. "I understand why there are only three trials despite this being called the search for the four treasures. We know the Holy Grail is impossible to obtain. That's why there are six people for three trials… We could've been divided two to a trial… But I think if we go about things this way, we won't be split fairly…"

Sir Perceval declared, "About that…my King, Nanami Kuonji, does not plan on participating in the treasure search."

Click! The Russian woman standing next to Sir Palamedes had instantly aimed an assault rifle at Nanami Kuonji.

Naturally, Sir Perceval moved as fast as the wind to stand in her way, protecting Nanami.

"C'mon, Misha. Cut that out." Sir Palamedes placed his hand over the muzzle of the gun held by the Russian girl—Misha.

…They're…fast. Sweat beaded on Felicia's forehead.

Sir Perceval and Sir Palamedes were…stupidly quick.

Though Misha was human, she was as fast and as skilled as a Jack. It was obvious she was a career soldier or something similar.

All of it had happened in the span of a single blink.

“We’ve gotten to this point, and you won’t participate in the treasure search? …What the hell are you up to?” Without lowering the gun, Misha remained indifferent and emotionless.

That gun…

Based on Felicia’s knowledge, it was something called an Avtomat Kalashnikova—an AK-47. However, the metal making up the weapon gave off a curious metallic sheen, though it was neither gold nor silver.

Is this Misha person…?

Misha continued her interrogation. “Answer me. If you don’t give me an acceptable answer, then prepare for battle right now, right here. It doesn’t matter whether we fight before we get the treasures or after.”

The tension was palpable in the room.

Sir Perceval shielded the quivering girl behind his back. “She didn’t enter the King Arthur Succession Battle of her own volition. She was dragged into it and just made a King… We came here today to see what kind of people the other Kings are. We have no ulterior motives.”

“I find that impossible. In that case, why haven’t you destroyed or abandoned your Excalibur and withdrawn from the succession battle?”

Misha kept pressing the issue.

Sir Perceval answered, “Even if she wanted to abandon it, she can’t… You get it, right?”

As Nanami continued to hide behind her Jack, Misha gave the girl another once-over from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

Nanami had nothing that looked like a weapon on her.

“…I see. So that’s what it is.” Misha started to lower her gun, as if she suddenly understood something. “So the identity of your Excalibur…I see. That’s how you were able to survive for so long… Hmm. Fine—”

Misha turned away, about to point the muzzle away from her target.

“—So you thought!”

She whirled around, rolling to the side fast enough to leave an afterimage. As she leaped, she turned her weapon on Nanami and kept her gun’s sights set on the girl.

“You’re repugnant! This is the gathering place of proud knights! If you don’t intend to fight, die!”

“Eek?!”

“—Gh?! Like I’d allow that to happen—!” Sir Perceval unsheathed his sword and tried to get in between them.

“Sorry—” Sir Palamedes’s scimitar blade flashed at the knight. “If that’s Misha’s inclination, then I must obey her.”

“Sir Palamedes?!”

It all happened in an instant.

Misha mercilessly tried to pull the trigger on Nanami, who had gone pale.

Sir Perceval’s sword and Sir Palamedes’s blade clashed head-on.

SHIIIIIIIIIIIIING!

Three flashes of metal, accompanied by a metallic whine, tore through the disorder.

“Wha?!”

“Gah?!”

“…?!”

Misha, Sir Perceval, and Sir Palamedes were taken aback.

“…Huh?” Nanami blinked.

Misha’s gun, Sir Perceval’s sword, and Sir Palamedes’s blade had left their hands, revolving through the air.

“Hey now. Aren’t you guys getting ahead of yourselves?”

At the center of everything, Rintarou was calmly holding his two swords.

“This is the main course we’ve all been waiting for… How about we pace ourselves for dessert, huh?”

“Wh-what did you do…?!” Misha slowly backed off as she took caution of Rintarou. “Did you just send my weapon flying…?”

Protecting Nanami empty-handed, Sir Perceval blinked from his surprise. “…I’ve seen that swordsmanship from just now before… You couldn’t be…?”

Sir Palamedes clutched his tingling hand as he stared at Rintarou with icy eyes that seemed as though they belonged to someone else.

“Pick ’em up. I’m not planning on having a shootout or whatever with you guys right now…,” Rintarou said calmly and sheathed his swords. “Right, King?”

“Exactly. Ha. Good job, Rintarou. You did well.”

Even though she hadn’t done anything, Luna lorded it over the others as though she was superior to them. “My goal is to become the best king in the world. There’s no point in settling things with a surprise attack.”

“…Are you looking down on us? Why would you show mercy to your enemies…?”

Misha’s face contorted from humiliation as she glared at Luna and Rintarou.

“Let’s take advantage of their kindness for now, Misha.” Sir Palamedes had gone back to being his usual arrogant self, quickly picking up the blade and gun that had been sent flying and soothing her. “We were careless. She’s got to be Luna Artur…I heard she was the weakest King, but it looks like she’s got a troublesome character backing her.”

“…Gah! You there! Rest assured, I’ll return the favor someday!”

“I’d like to see you try. If you pipsqueaks are even capable, that is.”

Until then, the air had been strained, but…the tension in the room started to melt away.

“You got me all frightened there.” Felicia took her hand off her rapier Excalibur’s hilt and breathed out in relief.

“…Hmm.” Sir Mordred snorted and put her unsheathed dagger Excalibur back in its sheath.

“Are you done?” the Queens asked, as if they couldn’t read the vibe.

“No, not yet. Even if Nanami’s group doesn’t enter the treasure hunt, there are still four people. If we continue…,” Sir Palamedes tried to object.

“Ha-ha-ha! It’s no issue!” Luna boomed, thrusting out her chest like it was her moment to shine. She crossed her arms and declared with an insolent grin, “I’m not interested in any of those worthless quests! We’re going to look for the Holy Grail!”

“““Huh?!”””

Misha, Sir Palamedes, Nanami, Sir Perceval, and Sir Mordred widened their eyes. Words escaped them.

“…Oh? And what is this…?”

Only Sir Dinadan shrugged as though he was enjoying himself, taking a long drag of his cigarette.

“So there are exactly three of you, right? Good for you! One for each quest!”

“…Huh?!” Misha looked at the Queens as though imploring them…

“…Yes, we’ve made special arrangements for Luna,” answered Elaine, acting as the Queens’ representative. “Of course, obtaining the Holy Grail is not required to win. From the outset, King Arthur was unable to succeed at this quest. It is impossible for Luna’s group to obtain it. Even if one were to obtain it, the chance of bringing it back is unlikely…”

Misha glared at Luna. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but this means you’ve thrown in the towel, right? The weakest King, Luna Artur. Is this your last-ditch effort? Did things get to your head because your underling is powerful?”

“It’s not like I’ve actually thrown the battle, and I’m not desperate. I never needed the Holy Grail—which is basically a cheap hack—anyway.”

“What?! Then what’s your reason?!”

Misha was dumbfounded by Luna, who had put her hands behind her head and started whistling.

“I’ve just got some business I have to take care of. Well, I guess you could call this my royal road.”

“Hmph… Have it your way. Just make sure you don’t regret it.”

As though the conversation was over, Misha turned her back on Luna.

“Then…we will now open the gates to the netherworlds that lead to the trials.”

The three Queens split in three different directions to stand apart from each other in the hall.

“I invite you to the trial of the Holy Sword. To the story of a certain knight who crushed the arrogance of a king.”

“I invite you to the trial of the Holy Spear. To the story of a certain knight who was charmed by power and toyed with it until he was in ruins.”

“I invite you to the trial of the Holy Stone. To the story of pursuing a certain beast that sows discord and destruction.”

The Queens put their hands together and muttered something as though they were offering up prayers. Their bodies started to glow. Eventually,

particles of their Auras rose and flooded the area before gathering and forming Gates.

The Gates led to each of their netherworlds.

Finished with their preparations, the Queens opened their eyes and turned to the Kings.

“Now then, which trial will you attempt?”

“You do not need to think deeply on it… Allow your heart, your soul, to guide your feet.”

“That will most certainly be the trial you should face—”

At the Queens’ invitation, the participants started to…

At that moment…a witch grinned in a certain place on the man-made island of Avalonia.

“Yes… The treasure hunt has finally begun.”

Her face filled with sinister delight, growing darker than the night and the bottom of the sea.

“In other words, this marks the beginning of the end.”

—

“All right, looks like everyone left, including Felicia.”

They had finished watching them leave to the netherworlds with each of the Queens.

Luna, Rintarou, and Sir Kay headed toward the place where they had been told to go. They were approaching the harbor area at the outskirts of the beach resort in Area Nine. Rintarou’s group arrived at the pier of a certain harbor.

Across the ocean, the horizon spread out in front of them. The waves rolled quietly, as though they were in a lull.

The clamor of people was far away from them. The place was deserted. Not a single ship bobbed in the harbor.

“Is the entry point for the Holy Grail search over here?”

Luna held her palm to her forehead as she leaned out from the wharf and searched across the horizon.

“Hey, stop that. You’ll fall into the water.” Rintarou grabbed Luna’s shoulders and sighed as he pulled her back. “…The ocean, huh?”

“Hmm? Is something wrong? Rintarou, is there something wrong with the sea?” Sir Kay asked quizzically, since he seemed so down.

“No, it’s like…I haven’t had a great opinion of the ocean lately… especially with my trauma.”

“…Oh? Looks like there’s fog rolling in.”

Their vision started to turn white. The fog rode in on a zephyr from offshore, wrapping around them like smoke.

The mist grew thicker—denser, heavier.

Their vision was bleached whiter and whiter… Eventually, the fog started to obstruct the sunlight, and the area became dimmer.

There was no way this was natural… As soon as they thought that, the dense fog parted, and a boat rowed up to the pier.

It wasn’t what one would call a modern boat. It was made from oak and appeared similar to an old-fashioned sailing ship. Constructed with nothing more than a mast and square canvas for the main sail, it was hard to imagine it going anywhere other than the direction of the wind.

It felt like it had come straight from another century.

“Wh-what is this thing?” Luna was bewildered.

“Welcome. Thank you for making your way here,” said someone from behind.

Two humanoid forms appeared like ghosts from the fog.

One of them was a girl who somehow seemed ethereal. She had beautiful honey-blond hair, clear, white skin like pure snow, and a delicate, fairylike face. Though she was dainty, her body curved gracefully under the gossamer garment that glided over her, and she wore a laurel hair ornament on her head.

“I am Dindrane. Three knights partaking in the Holy Grail pilgrimage, I will be your guide for the Holy Grail search.” She quietly bowed.

Just as she looked, she was humble and gentle in demeanor. She was the personification of an ideal girl for some men.

But as for the person beside her…

“…”

They seemed to be a strange character.

The figure wore a full-body cloak and a hood like a traveler. Because the robe was pulled low over the person’s eyes, Rintarou couldn’t see much of the figure’s face or make out their build.

“……”

Unlike the girl who called herself Dindrane, the hooded silhouette remained silent, without so much as an introduction. Rintarou couldn’t judge their gender by their voice, which made them even eerier.

“I will lead you on the road to the Holy Grail. It is a pleasure to meet you all.”

“Hey, wait a sec,” Rintarou called out to stop the two, who had immediately turned around to go into the boat. “You said you’re Dindrane, right? I know you’re the Queen who organizes this hunt. But what’s with that *extra* over there?” He jerked his finger at the cloaked figure. “I didn’t hear about this—nothing about this boat or an extra person… This seems different from the other trials.”

“That is just how…*special* the trial for the Holy Grail is.”

“……” Even though Rintarou had fixed a glare on the cloaked figure, they maintained their silence. It was almost as though…the person was appraising him.

“This is a judge.” Dindrane introduced the mysterious character.

“…A judge? What? What does that mean?”

“Don’t worry about that. Please let your souls guide you through this trial. I have faith you will get the result you’re looking for.” Dindrane cast a

glance at the dumbfounded group and continued down the pier…crossing the gangplanks and climbing into the antiquated boat anchored there.

“Hey…?!”

“……” The mysterious character silently turned around and followed Dindrane onto the boat.

“…Rintarou.”

“I know. It looks like all we can do is go.”

“It seems that way.”

After exchanging a round of nods, the three of them followed after Dindrane and headed onto the boat.

When they got inside, the boat departed almost as though it were gliding.

The wind blew of its own accord, nudging the boat offshore.

At some point, the fog had cleared, and they saw the expansive ocean spreading endlessly along the horizon that separated the sky and the sea. The breeze was gentle, waves lapping around them, and the sunlight that poured down from above created ripples between the undulations. It was the perfect weather for a voyage.

“Whoa! This is amazing! Look, Sir Kay! Wow!”

“W-wait! Luna! That’s dangerous!”

Luna was incredibly excited, pacing all over the boat. A voyage on such an old boat had to have been novel to her.

“How old is she again…?” Rintarou observed her, exasperated, from his periphery. “…Sorry. They can be annoying sometimes,” he explained to the mysterious character standing at the prow and looking out ahead of them.

“……”

But, of course, the enigma said nothing.

While the briny breeze ruffled their cloak, all the figure did was stare ahead. They remained stock-still, almost giving off the illusion that they were a statue underneath the cloak.

…It was really uncanny.

“What’s up with you…? Cat got your tongue? Have you been ordered to be silent?”

“Rintarou Magami, why do you seek the Holy Grail?” the figure suddenly muttered to him, still turned toward the sea.

Was that…a girl’s voice?

It was as clear as a bell…and certainly belonged to a girl.

“So you can talk…”

“Why?” repeated the mysterious girl, interrupting his grumbling.

It was almost as though she was testing him about something. As though she was trying to probe him.

“…” Rintarou felt like she had some kind of ulterior motive. He remained in thought for a while. “…We’re here to save Nayuki… She’s someone important to us, a friend.”

…He honestly told her what was on his mind.

“…I see.” It sounded like she was smiling. “…Please…do not forget that was why you started.”

She ended things there. The girl went silent once more.

She let the sea breeze ruffle her cloak and stared beyond the waves.

What’s up with her…? Rintarou was stupefied.

However, even while having that conversation, Rintarou did not let his guard down.

The search for the Holy Grail had already begun.

This was already a netherworld. He didn’t know what could happen when.

It’s fine. I don’t care if it’s a sea demon or a flying dragon. Come at me. I’ll hack up anything that stands in the way of the Holy Grail. I’ll protect Luna and Sir Kay. I would never let anyone else be taken from me…

…

Though Rintarou was ready to spring into action, nothing happened on the boat. All it did was bob its way through the ocean…

Eventually, the sun passed the meridian and started to wane… It burned red against the horizon as it sank beyond the sea…

Before they knew it, night had fallen.

Gone was the calm sea from the afternoon. Now it was an abyss stained by darkness. It looked like the bottom of hell’s cauldron spread before them, separated by just a single plank of the boat’s bottom.

“…Hey, Rintarou. Let’s rest for today.”

“Right…”

As though they feared the sea, they went down the stairs below the deck and retreated into the ship’s bowels. At some point, the mysterious girl in the hood and cloak had abruptly disappeared from aboard the boat.

“Whoa! It’s pretty nice inside here.”

When they went into the ship cabin, they found three neat and tidy beds illuminated by the light of the lamp.

“Hmm? There are three beds… Sorry Rintarou, looks like you’re the one on the floor!”

“Hey, wait… No, well…I don’t really mind…”

As Luna slapped him on the back, Rintarou scowled. He was concerned about the mystery girl’s disappearance, but since Dindrane hadn’t mentioned it, it didn’t matter whether he worried or not.

In other words, there was one guy and three girls. Rintarou would be on the floor… He couldn’t do anything about that arrangement.

“Well, if you get on your hands and knees and beg me, I might reconsider, seeing as I’m generous and kind. Repeat after me: ‘I will pledge my absolute obedience to you, Master Luna!’ Then, well, um…I-I’d l-let you sleep with me in my bed—”

“I wonder if there’s a hammock or something around here?”

“Are you ignoring me?!”

Rintarou looked around.

“It’s fine, Master Rintarou. I do not require sleep. You should rest in a bed. The journey ahead is a long one.” Dindrane smiled, urging him before quietly withdrawing from the cabin.

“Oh, really? Don’t mind if I do…” He rolled onto one of the beds.

“Hmph, good for you, Rintarou…”

For some reason, Luna kicked her legs unhappily from the bed next to him with her head propped up in her hand.

“…Huh?” Sir Kay cried out.

“What’s wrong?” Rintarou rolled across the bed toward Sir Kay. Sir Kay seemed dubious as she fiddled with her sheets.

“It’s just…when I sat on the bed, I thought I felt something hard under my butt…?” She turned over the bedsheets.

“What’s this? A…sword?”

…A bare sword had been hidden there, lying on the soft mattress.

“Wait. I’m scared! Why would this be here…?!”

“Lemme see.”

Sir Kay handed the naked blade over to Rintarou.

“…It’s a normal sword. I don’t feel anything unusual from it, no magical abilities. Somebody hid it like it was important, but it’s shockingly boring… It’s almost amazing that there’s nothing interesting about it.”

“Oookaaay…”

After taking the sword from Rintarou, Sir Kay looked at it for a while. Eventually, she sighed as she propped it against the wall next to her, losing interest in it all together.

“Anyway… How about we sleep? We haven’t got a clue how long this quest will take anyway. We’ve gotta get rest while we can,” Rintarou said.

“…All right.”

“Sounds good.”

They turned off the lamp in the room, settling into their beds.

The search for the Holy Grail has finally begun…just wait, Nayuki…

Rintarou folded his hands behind his head and sprawled out, thinking as he stared at the ceiling.

I don’t care if things get tough… I’ll get the Holy Grail and save you…, he vowed. …The Holy Grail… If I just have the Holy Grail…I…

He could get back his old life. Luna, Sir Kay, Emma, Felicia, Sir Gawain…and Nayuki would be there.

He could get back the place where he belonged—in those days of chaos but good fun.

…If I just have…the Holy Grail…

Rintarou slowly closed his eyes…

……

…He was dreaming.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! C’mon! Come at me!”

“Take that! Hyah!”

It was sometime, someplace in the outskirts of a nostalgic town of another country.

Deep in a conifer grove, two kids around six or seven years old were goofing off. One of them was a Japanese boy with short black hair, going through his rebellious phase.

The other was a blond-haired, blue-eyed English girl who seemed indomitable.

The two of them were facing off with tree branches, sword fighting in a game of make-believe.

“Ahhhhhh!”

Well, maybe it wasn’t right to call it “make-believe.” Their fight was too skilled and serious to call it that.

The girl must have trained in swordplay for a little bit.

She gripped the branch in both hands, springing at him to deliver her blows, which were fast and sharp enough that even a normal adult wouldn’t be able to bear through three of them. She must have been the type one would have labelled a genius. However, despite her blows…

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What’s wrong with you?!” The boy holding branches in both his hands moved like a gale and continued to parry her.

It was evident the girl had been properly trained. Unlike her, the boy was haphazardly moving on instinct. It was likely he had only recently picked up the blade… This might have even been his first time. Even still, the boy was overpowering the girl. He saw through all her successive attacks and sent them flying away, parrying, stopping, blocking, and deflecting—

“There!”

Bsht! His right branch cracked like a whip, smashing into her side.

“Yow?! That hurt!”

“Heh-heh. I win!” The boy cried in triumph with his higher-pitched, adolescent voice.

“Gaaaaaaah! I can’t believe I lost again!” The girl stomped in frustration.

“You’ve still got a way to go, ▪▪▪▪ .”

“Rinta, that’s so unfair!”

“What’s unfair? Is it my fault that you’re so weak?”

“N-nuh-uh! I know you’re cheating! Because I’m gonna be king! And I’ve been *twaining* this whole time!”

“Um… I still don’t know what you mean when you talk about becoming ‘king’…”

“It means I can’t lose! There hasn’t been any other kid who won against me! I didn’t even lose to the adults! So, Rinta, you have to be cheating!”

“Heh! That just means the people around you are noobs! So? What’re you going to do? You wanna go again? Or not? Are you surrendering, king?”

“…I wanna go again.” The girl stood up sullenly and readied her wooden “sword.” “I’ll win this time…”

“Heh-heh-heh. That’s the spirit.” The boy smiled insolently and readied his branches.

“Hyaaaaaaaaah!”

“Heh! Come at me!”

Like puppies pouncing on each other, the girl and boy started their sword fight.

……

…A while later.

“Heh-heh! That was easy!”

The boy had mercilessly beaten up the girl. She must have lost her will to fight, because she sank to the ground and sat down.

“That’s seventeen to zero! Which means I win! How’s that, ▪▪▪▪ !”

The boy was triumphant in front of the silent girl.

It was natural. He was at that age when he wanted to tease cute girls who had caught his attention.

“Oh…”

Eventually, he realized he had gone too far. He started to panic, looking at the girl who stared at her lap in silence.

“Uh, ummm…well, sorry…I kinda took it too far…”

He wanted to draw her attention by teasing her, but not to the point where she hated him.

As the boy was flustered by his age-appropriate dilemma…

“…zing,” muttered the girl with her face turned down.

“Huh? Whatcha say?”

He couldn’t hear her well. His eyes darted around, nervous.

“Rinta, that was amazing!” She jumped to her feet, eyes glittering as she drew closer.

His face flushed, looking surprised, when she had abruptly gotten close enough for them to feel each other’s breaths.

“That was super-frustrating! But you’re amazing! I was no match for you! I completely lost! How’d you get so good?!”

“How…? I don’t know. Somehow?”

“Hmph…! You’re so annoying! But that was really amazing…!” Her expression kept changing from highs to lows as she showered him with praise.

Eventually, she blurted out, “Okay! I know! You’ve passed, Rinta!”

“Huh? Passed what?”

“That’s right! I’ll make you my vassal—my only one! Aren’t you happy?!”

“Whaaaaat?! Why?! Why am I *your* vassal?!”

“Because I’ll become the best king in the world! Aren’t you happy you get to be my one and only vassal?! I mean, I’m just so awesome!”

The boy seemed lost.

“Heh-heh! You might be stronger than me, but if you’re my vassal, that means your power is mine! That’s what you call kingliness!”

“Pfft! Shut up! Who would follow someone as weak as you?!”

He stuck out his tongue, turning her down, since he was at an age where it was hard for him to be honest with his feelings.

“If you wanna make me your underling, you’ve got to do it after winning against me!”

“Hmph! Challenge accepted! Then let’s go for another round!”

Just when he thought she was smiling, her face clamped down into a scowl, flushing red from anger.

These were wistful days that he had forgotten in the present, containing memories of a girl whose name he could not recall.

Those blissful moments passed before he knew it…and inched closer to the day they would part.

“No, no, no! I wanna be with you longer! I wanna play!”

It was almost the day they would go their separate paths.

In front of him, the girl was shrieking in tears. “You can’t go home! Don’t go home! Why do you have to go?!”

“St-stop being so stubborn… I told you…I was only staying here for a month…,” he said in front of the girl reduced to sobs. He seemed tired.

To tell the truth…I don’t want to go home, either. I want to stay with her…

But he was at an age when he couldn’t be sincere. The boy could only reject her.

At the time, neither of them was at an age where they had cell phones. His parents were often moving across the map for their jobs, and her family was decidedly against her being involved with the boy.

This departure would be absolute and permanent.

“Noooooo! I don’t want to say bye!”

“Shut up! What can we do about it?!”

“*Sniff… Hiccup*…waaaaaaaaah…ahhhhhhhh…”

To keep the girl from whining…

“Okay! Okay! Uhhh…you’re gonna become a king someday or something, right?”

“Yeah…*hiccup*…”

“And…you kept saying you’d make me your vassal all month long, right? You were really persistent about it, too.”

“Yeah. But you never became my vassal…*sniffle*…”

“…I will.”

“Huh?”

“I will, someday, when you become the best king in the world.”

…The boy had made his promise.

“…R-really?”

“Yeah, I promise. But you have to become a king who’s worthy of me—a really great one. Otherwise, I won’t become your vassal!”

I know I sounded annoyed, but I wasn’t unhappy about it…

Becoming her vassal was a small price to pay if he could stay by her side, which he couldn’t bring himself to say.

“Yeah… When that happens…I’ll make you my vassal, *Rintarou*!”

…When I looked at her smile, I swore I saw a dewy flower bud, wet from tears…

And when she finally got my name right, my heart started to pound for some reason, and it felt like I was ascending.

That was why I vowed to her in my young, pure mind.

“Heh! Trust me! I promise! When you become the greatest king in the world, I’ll race over to your side and rescue you like a hero! Just you wait!”

If ▪▪▪▪ were to become the greatest king in the world…that meant I would have to become the greatest vassal in the world…

…After I separated from ▪▪▪▪ …I worked my ass off.

I aimed to become the best in any field, abandoning myself.

I outdid myself so I’d never lose against anyone no matter what.

After all, I was going to serve the best king in the world.

And a vassal who served an awesome king has got to be the best in the world, right?

Lucky for me, I used to be a sorcerer named Merlin or something in my past life. Whenever my memories from my past life were revived, I could display more and more abilities that were beyond human.

Regardless of age or gender, no one was able to stand against me.

I was proud.

I believed this was how I could become the world’s greatest vassal, fitting for ▪▪▪▪ .

……

…But…I had realized something at a certain point: Everyone was looking at me as though I was some kind of monster.

It was so weird. The girl aspiring to be king would have validated me. Why didn’t they accept me? Why were they looking at me with disgust?

But I continued to outdo myself, excelling to outdistance myself. I just kept grinding.

I’d become her vassal—the best vassal in the world. I needed to work hard.

…I’m doing this for her…

But the harder I worked…the more isolated I became.

Everyone hated me, shunned me, envied me, disparaged me… Eventually, I was even abandoned by my own parents…

Even when times got tough, even when it was too much for me to bear, I carried on. I worked through it.

I kept running, recklessly, with one goal in mind.

Right… I’m doing it for her… But who was she…?

I kept going…until I was totally alone.

……

…When I came home from school and my parents had disappeared, leaving behind just a note…I snapped to my senses.

Because I had ground toward my one goal… Because I hadn’t looked back or taken anything else into consideration…I had lost sight of what was important.

For what and for who was I working so hard?

These hardships had prevented me from connecting to myself; I could no longer remember why I had started out in the first place.

What was I doing this for…? For who…?

What did I even want to become in the first place…?

I had lost everything. My dreams. My hopes. I was empty.

The world was gray. Everything was boring.

I didn’t want anything. I didn’t even have any hope.

It was all hollow.

I didn’t have a place in this world… There was nowhere I belonged…

……

“—Gh?!” Rintarou jolted out of sleep.

He must have had a nightmare. His entire body was drenched in sweat.

Luna and Sir Kay were snoring in the beds next to him. When he looked out the window of the cabin, it was pitch-black. It was still the middle of the night. Not much time had passed since he had gone to sleep.

Rintarou rubbed his eyes when he felt something cold trail down his cheek.

“…Was I crying or something…?”

He felt sick.

“Dammit… Why did I have to dream about that now…?”

He needed to just go back to sleep…but he didn’t feel like it.

“…Geez… I’m sick of it… Have I always been this anxious…?”

After deciding that the night wind might clear his mind, Rintarou crawled out of bed and slipped out of the cabin.

Creak… Baam… The door fell shut.

After Rintarou left…Luna snapped open her eyes, even though she seemed to be stretched out on the bed fast asleep.

As she felt Rintarou get farther away, she tugged something out from her chest pocket—a worn Celtic protection cross made from hawthorn.

“…Rintarou…you…”

Luna looked at that protection charm with wistful eyes—giving it a good squeeze in her hand.

She let her eyes close again.

“……” Rintarou leaned on the handrail and gazed out at the ocean.

He looked over the dark sea, devoid of moonlight, writhing like a demon underfoot.

The cold wind froze him to the core.

“…Right… I can remember stuff because of that dream… I put myself through the wringer for her… How stupid…”

He had done it for *her*, someone whose face and name he couldn’t remember anymore.

He had raced through his formative years for her. All his memories as a kid were bitter, tainted.

Letting his body bob up and down with the ship, he squinted, trying to see through the dense fog obscuring his memories.

He tried to remember…*her* face, her name.

He felt almost as though he could remember them at any moment.

It felt like the answer was just within arm's reach…but he just couldn't remember *her*.

Even though he'd partially recovered his memories from the dream, they steadily became murkier…

"Hmph… Who cares about the past when I was just a little brat…? I'm different now…I've changed from how I used to be back then…!"

Rintarou was irritated at the unpleasant feeling that had started to eddy at the back of his chest.

"And it's not like there's time for this right now! Aren't I going to save Nayuki?! Keep it together…! What good will it do to be this nervous…?!"

He shook his head as though he was trying to shake off that feeling.

"That's right, Rintarou…"

"You're…not alone anymore…"

He snapped his head up. He could swear he heard someone calling out to him.

"…Who's there?" He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword and cautiously surveilled the air.

No one was there.

"Well…but I swore I heard someone…"

If that wasn't a hallucination or his imagination, he knew that voice belonged to…

"Rintarou…over here…I'm over here…"

He heard it again—from close by…or so he thought.

"…It couldn't be…?" Rintarou produced a small leather bag from his pocket, ever so carefully.

It contained the remnants of Nayuki's Fairy Crystal Core recovered the other day when he had attacked Vivian. When he looked at it, it was flickering with a demure, soft light.

"…Th-this is…?!" He stared at the bag in disbelief…

"Rintarou…"

He heard a clear voice coming from behind him. "Huh?!"

Rintarou whipped around, lowering his guard. His face contorted into a complex expression, as though he wanted to both cry and smile.

"…I see…I guess something like this could happen in a netherworld…"

There was a grinning girl daintily perched there…

……

…It was morning.

Sunlight poured through the windows and lit the inside of the cabin.

“Haaaah… I slept like a log last night… Morning!” Sir Kay got up from the bed and stretched.

“……Morning…,” grumbled Luna, seeming downbeat.

“Ha-ha! How much longer are you going to be in bed? I think you need to pull it together!” Rintarou seemed refreshed, chuckling at them.

Even Sir Kay, who wasn’t all that sharp, could tell he was in a good mood.

…They’re acting kind of strange.

“…Huh? I-is something wrong with you two?”

“……Not really.”

“Of course not. Why?”

Luna was oddly gloomy, and Rintarou was strangely bright.

“……” Sir Kay observed the way the two acted for a while.

“Aaaaaah!” she shrieked hysterically as if she realized something. “Y-y-y-you couldn’t have…?!”

She whipped out of bed and ran to Luna’s side. With tears in her eyes, she examined her whole body.

“S-so is that what happened, Luna?! Did he do something indecent to you in your sleep? The kinks of a maniac…and a heretic! I’m so sorry! I can’t believe I failed to protect you from such violence, even while I was right next to you! I, Sir Kay, for the rest of my days—”

“Excuuuuuuse meee?!”

“Gaaaaah?!”

Luna held Sir Kay in her arms and used a German suplex to throw her backwards.

“…What are you even doing…?” Rintarou watched the two, looking exasperated.

Sometime later…

“Why would you jump to that conclusion?!”

“I—I apologize…”

Sir Kay sat on the bed, shrinking down on herself, as Luna ripped into her.

“For starters, Rintarou and I are a lord and her vassal! There’s no way anything you’re imagining could have happened!”

“B-but…I just felt that if Rintarou pinned you down, you’d just go right down…”

“Did? You? Say? Something?!”

“I’m sorry!” Sir Kay turned pale and started shivering. “…Ow.” She suddenly held her right hand and scowled.

“…? What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing…there was suddenly a sharp pain in my right palm…?”

Sir Kay looked at her hand. However, there was nothing particularly out of the ordinary about it.

“I thought I had cut my hand on something, but it seems I was just imagining things.”

She felt almost as though she had been bewitched as she looked at her right palm.

“Hey, guys? Stop fooling around. How about we get some grub? According to Dindrane, we’re close to where we need to be.”

“Y-yeah. Let’s grab something to eat.”

“…Right.”

Shouldering their individual concerns, the three of them left the cabin behind.

CHAPTER 4

Where the Holy Grail Lies

Carrying Rintarou's group, the boat eventually arrived at a certain island—an expansive piece of land that commanded a view of mountains in the distance and plains and groves of trees as far as the eye could see.

Of course, it was no ordinary island.

Made inside a netherworld, it apparently projected an image of the British Isles from the legendary era.

"I see… You weren't lying when you said this would be a 'search' for the Holy Grail."

"Yes. It is somewhere on this island. I will wait for you on this boat… May luck be on your side."

Upon parting ways with Dindrane, they started their journey without a destination.

An expanse of plains. A mountain range. A forest, deep and dark.

They emerged on the other side of these natural obstacles, making progress on their trip. Along the way, apparitions had tried to obstruct their path, but they continued to cross the wastelands, stopping by villages and towns to gather information about the Holy Grail.

While they continued to doggedly collect intel, they learned that the Holy Grail would appear elusively in various places. There were many reports of sightings when it apparently materialized its miraculous power.

Relying on these rumors, they followed the path of the Holy Grail, continuing their journey.

"Raaah!"

Rintarou's swords cracked like thunder.

A storm of slashes minced the gigantic body of a demon.

"Graaaaaaaah?!" It let out a repulsive shriek and flapped its wings in a panic, flying up and distancing itself.

"Luna! Let's go!"

"Got it!"

With their swords at the ready, Rintarou and Luna charged at the demon side by side.

It was all going down in a certain village where they stopped after hearing rumors of the Holy Grail. This place had been controlled by a certain powerful demon.

It was gigantic—as big as a house from the ground up—with the face of a lion, the brawny torso of a giant man, four eagle-like wings, and the tail of a snake. It was repulsive—a most terrifying form.

The demon ruled over that village through brute force and fear, regularly demanding sacrifices. Rintarou's group rested at that village during their journey. The village people clung to them the moment they saw the group visiting.

"The Holy Grail appeared in front of the village people and told them that the saviors of the village would finally appear." Apparently.

Even though this whole community was a figment of the netherworld, they couldn't leave it in this sorry state—even without the rumors of a Holy Grail appearance.

They decided to take on the request to exterminate the demon.

Just when it appeared, demanding its daily sacrifice, Rintarou and Luna intercepted it in the middle of the village plaza.

It was a terrific battle.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The demon swung its large arm, raging like a violent storm.

The ground was gouged inside out. The buildings had been obliterated as the explosive flames of magic set the village violently ablaze.

It was almost exactly like it was the end of that world. The hellish battleground was dominated by a fierce, destructive force.

However, Rintarou perilously evaded the demon.

"Raaah!" he shouted.

When the demon tried to swipe its claw, he whipped its arm away with his left sword and used his right sword to cut into it.

"GYAH!"

Marvelously, his sword gouged deep into the demon's breast.

"Hyaaaaah?!" Luna launched herself at the demon's chest when she saw her chance. Using all the weight in her body, she sprang up, aiming her sword tip and lunging at the beast like a gale.

Like a pile bunker, that single blow sank deep into the demon's stomach.

"ROOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAR!"

As if driven mad, the demon brought its fist down in an attempt to smash Luna's head, but…a sword flashed once.

"…Naive of you." Rintarou sliced cleanly through its fist, blowing it away.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!" Shrieking in pain, it applied pressure to its phantom hand.

"HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!" Luna yelled.

In the same beat, she ripped her sword out of its stomach, leaped through the air, and brought her sword down from above to split its skull. The demon raised another cry of agony.

"Heh! You're not too bad! You've really improved, Luna!"

"Because you're the one backing me up, Rintarou!"

The outcome of the fight had basically been decided.

Without a shred of egoism between them, they made a dynamic duo as they fiercely took on the demon.

The townspeople were watching the fight…

“Whoa! That’s amazing… They’re overpowering that demon…!”

“They’re our saviors… They must be…!”

“The Holy Grail was right…!”

From some high ground on the outskirts of the village, the people clasped hands as though praying and wept in gratitude.

“…Like I said. Things will be fine with the two of them,” said Sir Kay.

“You were right! Thank you so much, Lady Knight!”

It must have relieved the villagers to have her in full armor, protecting them. The villagers’ faces that had been dark with despair started to brighten with hope.

In contrast, Sir Kay looked down.

“……”

She took in Rintarou and Luna’s battle as it developed below her.

They’re strong… They’re completely overpowering that demon…

Rintarou and Luna had gotten stronger. He had been powerful from the get-go, but even he had boosted his strength. Luna had undergone a transformation, determined not to lose to him.

They had experienced enough carnage to toughen them up. The same could be said for Felicia and Sir Gawain, though they were absent.

As for me… Sir Kay looked bitter as she reflected on herself. She knew. She hadn’t improved at all.

Even Sir Gawain had talent. For a short while, he’d stopped growing because he was blinded by the allure of glory and depended too heavily on the Sun’s Blessing… Now that he’s abandoned his conceit and remembered his duty as a knight, I imagine he’ll grow stronger than he had been in the legendary era…

But that wasn’t the case for her. She’d already peaked.

She had no potential. She couldn’t hope for anything more.

“……” Sir Kay looked down at the fight once again.

If she had fought that demon with her current abilities, she would have instantly died. She couldn’t have even acted as a shield.

“…What…am I doing?”

When she thought about it, she’d served no use in any of the battles up until this point. She always had been there just to add to their numbers or act as a flesh shield. She might have even held them back.

I wonder if I’m just deadweight? Maybe I shouldn’t have come with them…? Sir Kay thought to herself, expression sinking.

“There’s no need for you to abase yourself, is there?” Out of the blue, someone spoke up next to her.

Sir Kay looked around to find a curious character. The person appeared to be a nomad, wearing a cloak and hood that covered their entire body.

The figure was looking down at Luna and Rintarou’s fight as well. It was almost impossible to make out the face under the deep hood…but Sir Kay could assume it was a girl based on the voice.

No, she knew more than that. This person had to be…

“You’re the one who was on that boat with us! Where have you been?! Why are you here?! Who are you?!”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m not anyone important.” She chuckled. Sir Kay caught a glimpse of just her mouth curling up into a smile. “More importantly, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“…I have a propensity to read people’s thoughts and worries. Maybe it’s because I’ve come across a wide array of people on my trips? Or maybe it’s my ego talking.”

She certainly seemed to give off a mysterious air.

There was something flighty about the girl’s tone, but she couldn’t hide her intelligence. It soaked through her every word. She was like an otherworldly hermit from the East…

“When your group decided to take on this demon, you immediately volunteered to protect the villagers… Why?”

“Because I’m weak… I’d be a burden…” Sir Kay lowered her eyes.

“I do not think there is any need to belittle yourself. You found something you could do…for their sakes.”

The mystery girl cast her gaze down, taking in the battle.

“A fight isn’t just about wielding your weapon, aiming directly at what’s in front of you. It can be hanging out in the back, keeping the peace. Because of you, they can fight without worry… And that is a fact.”

“…But I didn’t do anything…”

“Sure, they’ll be praised by the people. You’ll be lost in the shadows of their glory. Even then, that doesn’t diminish your noble accomplishments.” She sounded cheerful, as if she was smiling at Sir Kay. “You are a finer knight than anyone there ever was. *You haven’t changed a bit.*”

“Huh?” Sir Kay’s eyes went wide.

Then, the girl turned her back on the knight.

“Unfortunately…humans are born into their roles and limitations. If you want to push past your limits and if you’d allow me to give you a little piece of advice… I say, ‘Ask and ye shall receive.’”

“Wait…a second…”

“I think you have that right—more than any superior knight, or a decorated one.”

She left with those cryptic words.

“What does that—”

To inquire about the girl’s true motives, Sir Kay tried to follow her, but…

“”””Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!”””””

“Did they do it?! We did iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!”

“Our saviors!”

It seemed that just now, the battle below reached its conclusion.

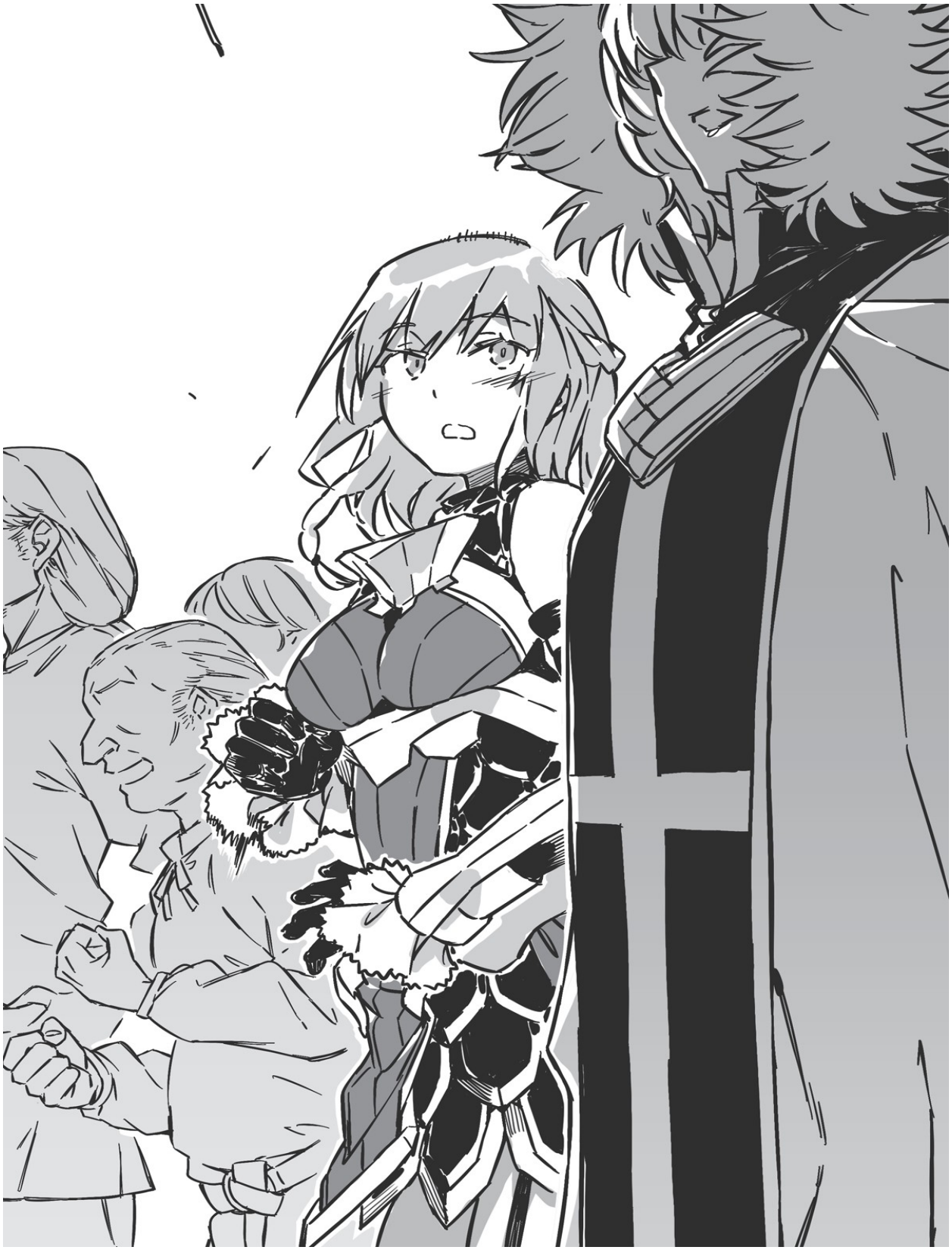
Sir Kay’s way was blocked by the villagers huddling closer. For a moment, the girl flashed in Sir Kay’s vision…

“Huh?!”

And then, she was no longer anywhere to be seen.

The villagers were crying from gratitude, delighted that they had been released from the demon’s control.

Sir Kay found herself alone and confused, lost in a daze.



On the night that Rintarou and Luna extinguished the demon, they were invited to a celebration by the whole village.

They set up a giant bonfire in the middle of the clearing where the villagers gathered with their meager amounts of food and alcohol to entertain them.

“Thank you from the bottom of our hearts…! Thanks to you, this village is saved…!”

Rintarou and Luna sat down together on a raised seat with grass mat cushions as the village chief poured them drinks.

“Heh-heh! That demon was an easy job for us!” Luna bragged, chest puffed up. She was letting things get to her head.

“I feel so bad that you went out of your way to arrange this banquet.”

On the other hand, Rintarou seemed awkward as he looked at the dishes lined up in front of him: hard black bread and simple soup, jerked meat and steamed potatoes… Hardly a feast.

Regardless, they knew the villagers tried hard to prepare this for them. After all, the village had been ruled over by a demon until this point. This was the best they could offer.

“Plus…we’ve caused enough property damage from the battle… We should have done better…”

Rintarou looked around, taking in the ruins—former buildings and fields. Though the demon was directly to blame, they shared a portion of the responsibility.

It was rare to see him act in such an admirable way…

“What are you talking about?”

“Please don’t worry about that!”

“We’re indebted to you!”

“B-but…” He still felt guilty about it, despite their insistence.

“It’s fine! Tomorrow will bring a new day!”

“Exactly! We just have to fix our ruined village and fields! Right?!”

“Indeed! There is no need for the saviors to worry!”

The villagers were very firm.

…This is a nice place. Rintarou couldn’t stop himself from breaking into a tiny smile.

“—You heard them! Dig in, Rintarou! And don’t hold back! That’s a royal order!”

“You *should* hold back a little, you glutton.” He sounded a little frustrated as he watched Luna roughly chew on some jerky.

Well, if I’ve learned anything from my experiences…it’s almost time.

Something happened as soon as he let his mind wander.

“Ask and ye shall receive.”

Suddenly, those words rained down from the sky.

In the middle of the plaza, above the flaming bonfire, a golden light flashed, blinding them.

Floating in the light was a chalice-like object—the Holy Grail.

With no heralding or premonition, the cup materialized, growing brighter, letting its pure luminescence bathe over the village and illuminating it brighter than the midday sun.

“Wh-what is this…?!”

“This must be…?!”

The villagers were starting to raise a commotion, which spread through the crowd like a ripple.

Then, something even more shocking happened in front of them.

An indescribable aroma tickled their noses. In the next moment, food and drink materialized in front of the villagers. The best bread, wine, cheese, fresh vegetables and fruit, generously spiced cooked meats and seafood, sausage soup… Not even the royal court would feast on such food in this age. And it was all shining under the Holy Grail’s light, glittering like gold.

That wasn’t the only thing that was odd.

“Oh! Whoa! Wh-what *is* this…?!”

“This is…?!”

Lo and behold, the village engulfed by the Holy Grail’s light was restored piece by piece. The houses that were decimated returned to their former states, and the desolate fields were in full harvest.

“I-it’s a miracle…!”

There were no other words to explain it. They wept with joy, praying up above.

“…I-it’s here…! The power of the Holy Grail is as strong as always…!”

“You’re right… If they had the power of this Holy Grail back then…the kingdom of Logres and the knights of the Round Table might not have fallen to ruin…”

Luna blinked, taking it in, and Sir Kay’s eyes seemed distant as they saw what was occurring in front of them.

Right then…someone faced the beaming chalice over the bonfire, sprinting furiously at it.

“Huh?!”

It was Rintarou.

He concentrated all the energy in his mind and body, tearing through the plaza toward the Holy Grail, running at speeds that couldn’t be registered by the human eye.

This time…this time, I’ll…!

With the Holy Grail in his sights as he launched himself into the air, he stretched out his hands to grab it…

I’ll…!

The Holy Grail was right in front of his nose…

All of a sudden…the chalice disappeared…and Rintarou’s outstretched hands grabbed air.

“…Dammit! *Again?!*” He ground his teeth in frustration as he landed. “Tch! I was close… I could almost feel it…!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha… Better luck next time, Rintarou…” Luna patted him on the back as if to soothe him.

“Ah… *Not another failure…* It seems this isn’t going to be easy…” Sir Kay was watching Rintarou and Luna from a slight distance as she sighed.

“Ow…” Suddenly, Sir Kay felt a sharp sting in her right palm.

Looking tired, she took off the gauntlet covering her hand and opened her palm to reveal a sharp and shallow cut… Blood bubbled up from it.

…This wound…again? But why…?

Sir Kay seemed unsure.

Rintarou was frustrated for other reasons.

Luna consoled him.

The villagers didn’t have any idea what was going on in their heads…

“Our saviors! This is a miracle! A gift from god! Now, let us have our fill —eating, drinking, and raising a storm all night! Ga-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The chief and townspeople laughed merrily and swarmed the group.

Cheers from the banquet carried on well past the middle of the night.

Then…

“Whew… The power of the Holy Grail sure is amazing. That’s a hack if there ever was one.”

Crackle. Crackle-crackle. Pop… Deep in the pitch-black forest, a small fire sizzled.

The flame quivered, making the shadows dance like apparitions.

Since they hadn’t been able to get the Holy Grail at the village, they decided they needed to move on immediately to the next place with sightings of the Holy Grail… As soon as they decided that as a group, they informed the villagers, who were reluctant to see them go before the banquet was even halfway over.

Now, they were gathered around a fire and making camp.

“And we witnessed an incredible miracle…” Rintarou watched the flames.

“Yeah… It’s like nothing is impossible with it. It’s amazing. I guess I can see why it’s famous…” Luna seemed somewhat reserved…

On their journey, they had already witnessed the Holy Grail and its miracles a handful of times.

There had been the case of a village plagued with a fatal disease. Though a doctor had been desperately prescribing medicinal herbs to save the village, nothing was helping.

However, the Holy Grail appeared, engulfing the village in light and healing everyone from their sickness—thereby saving them.

Another time, there had been a town suffering from famine due to a terrible drought. The villagers hadn’t lost hope and tried to create an irrigation system, but it hadn’t worked out well. As soon as they spotted the

Holy Grail, rain poured down on the desolated fields, and crops sprang up, complete with the finished irritation system.

There was a village that had been attacked by a large group of apparitions. The villagers' resistance had been futile. All they could do was await their destruction, but the Holy Grail's light erased these spirits and saved the people.

At another place, they came across a traveler who had traveled the world looking for a way to save a lover who was cursed with an incurable illness. The magic chalice appeared before them and cured the lover's malady in one moment.

Another time, during the middle of their travels, a gigantic dragon the size of a mountain attacked them. The treasure had suddenly come into sight. When it showered them with its light, an overwhelming power settled into their group as they faced the beast, allowing them to turn the battle around.

During their journey, every time they witnessed a miracle, they were shocked by the terrific power this magic chalice secretly had.

That itself was the power of the Holy Grail.

"We were so close… I was *this* close to grabbing the Holy Grail…," Rintarou grumbled, chuckling kindling into the center of the fire. "But if we obtain the Holy Grail…don't you think the King Arthur Succession Battle will be a walk in the park?"

"I am inclined to agree, seeing as it is a goblet capable of creating miracles as great as those. If one were to weaponize its power with a certain goal in mind, I imagine it would cause devastating effects." Sir Kay looked at her right palm. "If we can get our hands on the Holy Grail, there is no mistaking that we will be the closest to King Arthur."

"Right?! We're almost there… Now that we've gotten this far, we'll make sure to get our hands on it—for sure!" Rintarou started to get riled up along with Sir Kay.

"…" However, Luna's expression was stiff as she watched the flickering fire.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I think we made the right choice by forcing ourselves to go on this quest." Rintarou didn't seem to pay much attention to her. "I mean, if we can just get the Holy Grail, I'm sure we'd win. There's nothing we wouldn't be able to get our hands on, right? It has to be the strongest treasure out of the four."

He grinned, turning to Luna. "Basically, Luna, you'll finally be the world's best king who's fitting for me to serve! Get it together!"

He gave Luna a call to arms.

"…Rintarou," she suddenly murmured.

"Hmm? What's up? Something wrong?" He really looked at her.

Tilted down, her face glowed from the flames. Her expression seemed dark, coupled with the shadows.

For a while, Luna kept silent…then she finally murmured, "…I'm sorry for raining on your parade, Rintarou, but…"

"But what?"

"Don't you think…all this stuff with the Holy Grail is too convenient for us?"

"…Huh?" Rintarou was struck dumb.

"Well…don't you think it's too powerful? At first, I was ecstatic about its strength, but…to be blunt, I'm kind of starting to feel weirded out by it. How could it exist?"

"Why not? It's powerful because it's great. You get that thing, and you'll definitely become a king. The other guys won't compare."

"…" Luna was silent for a while. "…But then it wouldn't be my power, it'd be the Holy Grail's…" She continued to stare at her feet, trailing off. "That's not why I wanted to be king… I just wanted you to recognize me as one…"

"Hmm? You said something?"

"…" Luna didn't answer, remaining wordless for a while. "And…I think there's a more pressing matter."

"What?"

"…Just when are we going to get the Holy Grail?" she asked.

"…" Sir Kay was quiet…

Rintarou blinked at her. "Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He roared with laughter, clutching his stomach. It was like he was asking if she even heard herself.

"Wh-why are you laughing?! Is this something to laugh about?!" Luna couldn't hold back her anger as she stood up and objected.

"It'll be fine, Luna! We're almost there! I mean, it's just right around the corner! Don't worry, I'll get my hands on it!"

"That's not what I'm worried about!"

"I never thought this treasure hunt would be so simple! At every pit stop, we come across the chalice. If I'm being honest, I find it hard to believe a whole bunch of knights didn't make it back! Maybe they weren't as big of a deal as I made them out to be!"

Rintarou sounded very optimistic.

Luna finally lost her patience. "We don't have time to joke around! Do you know how long it's been since we got off that boat?! It's been *a year*! *A whole year!*"

He suddenly went silent. It felt like he was staring head-on at something he was trying to avoid.

Luna was spilling out everything that had been weighing heavily on her mind.

"I know time in the netherworld doesn't match up with the outside world! Even if we spend forever in here, we won't age, and I imagine it'll only be a second in our world! But it's already been a year of us chasing after the Holy Grail! It might appear in front of us…but it's no use! It

doesn’t seem like we’ll be able to hold it in our hands! All it does it keep showing us mind-blowing miracles!

“Don’t you think there’s something weird going on?! It appears always a step ahead of us. Isn’t it strange that we’ve been at this for a whole year and still can’t grab it?! Don’t you think we’re missing something?! Maybe we’re just plain wrong?! Right, Rintarou?!” Luna desperately appealed to him.

“Rintarou, I think that there’s something off, too,” Sir Kay interrupted them, holding her right palm out over the fire.

Luna must have noticed something, because she peered into Sir Kay’s face.

“Sir Kay… Did that happen *again*?”

“*Yes*. When the Holy Grail materialized…a wound appeared on my right palm as though it had been cut… Though it has closed now.”

“…” Rintarou was silent.

“It certainly is not a grave wound. It barely counts, since we can use healing magic. However…seeing that it synchronizes with the Holy Grail… I don’t think it can be written off as just any old wound. Plus, it has gotten bigger over time, which is why I think there’s a greater meaning behind it.”

“Yeah… There is definitely something fishy going on…but I can’t put my finger on it…” Luna looked like she was uncomfortable for the next part. “Hey, Rintarou…what do you think about going back to the boat? I think we missed something.”

“…Are you saying we should give up the Holy Grail after we’ve gotten this far?” Rintarou turned his face down slightly.

“I’m not saying that. It’s just…”

“It’ll be fine, Luna. We’ll get the Holy Grail soon… We’re right about to corner it. Sir Kay’s weird wound was probably just some sort of pesky curse she picked up, right? Once we have the Holy Grail, we’ll be able to fix that, too! …Am I wrong?”

“…Well…”

“And we’re probably the ones who have gotten closest to it, right? I mean, other than Galahad. This is our chance!”

“M-maybe, but…”

“Isn’t it normal for us to experience some trials and tribulations? It’s a treasure with that terrific of a power. You practically become the winner if you can obtain it. You can’t get an extra-rare item without a struggle… Isn’t that common sense?”

“You have a point, I suppose, but…!” Luna was succumbing to a strange unease.

There definitely was something off. The quest was fishy…and when she thought about it, there was something weird about Rintarou. His normal self would have already figured out before them something was wrong.

No matter how much she tried to persuade him about it, Rintarou was obstinate. He kept insisting they would get the Holy Grail…and he couldn't be flexible, like always.

"Hey, Rintarou…"

There's something off about you. Luna was just about to point that out…

"Are you not going to help me…Luna…?" Rintarou whispered, looking down in a pitiable way.

"!"

That had been a surprise attack.

When Rintarou made that face, Luna couldn't say anything.

"I…want to save Nayuki. I need the Holy Grail for that… Don't you know that?"

"…I do, but…"

Rintarou wanted the Holy Grail for Nayuki's sake.

Luna wanted to support him in his endeavors…but…

"Or…do you not believe me? Do you think I'm imagining a friend named Nayuki Fuyuse…?"

"…No. I believe you. I really do."

It was no use.

When Rintarou had such a heartbreaking look on his face, Luna just couldn't be strong about it.

She wasn't lying. She believed Rintarou. She believed there had been a girl named Nayuki Fuyuse in their group. That was why she couldn't deny Rintarou when he was so desperate about locating the Holy Grail for her sake.

"…"

She didn't know how he had taken her silence.

"…Thanks. I've been a lot of trouble, haven't I?" Rintarou smiled gently. "It'll be fine. We'll get the Holy Grail soon. I'll obtain it for sure. If we just have the Holy Grail, Nayuki will come back…and you'll become the true King Arthur. We'll get everything we want…so, please?"

He sounded certain. In any normal circumstance, she would have depended on him, but…

Is that true? Will we really be able to secure the Holy Grail?

Uncertainty flooded her chest. She felt like…Rintarou was going far off by himself somewhere.

"Well, let's get to sleep to prep for tomorrow. I'll keep watch."

"Okay… Thanks. Sorry for making you do that every night."

"Don't worry about it. Okay… Tomorrow, we'll get the Holy Grail."

After that exchange, Rintarou got ready to watch for the night.

Weighed down by this uneasy feeling she couldn't dismiss, Luna wrapped herself in a travel blanket and lay on her side, closing her eyes quietly.

…

Their journey would continue…on the following day.

And the day after that.
Their expedition to search for the Holy Grail would carry on.
It would persist, endlessly, to the edge of the world.
…
…
However, they would never reach the Holy Grail.

CHAPTER 5

Luna’s Resolution

—

“!”

Rintarou realized he was in the lounge of Logres Manor—somewhere familiar.

“Oh, huh? Why am I here…?” He took in his surroundings, confused.

He recognized that table, the sofa, the usual furnishings.

“Hey, Rintarou! Why do you keep spacing out?!”

And there was Luna, as peppy as usual.

“He must be exhausted because you kept dragging him around campus.” Sir Kay was there, sighing.

“Hee-hee-hee. Good work, Rintarou. I’ve made some tea. Please help yourself.”

Emma was in her maid outfit, smiling gently and pouring him a cup.

“Seriously, Rintarou… It might not seem like it, but we’re in the middle of war, here. Don’t you think you’re a bit too relaxed?”

Felicia sipped from her teacup, sounding annoyed at him.

“That’s unusual… I can’t believe Merlin would doze off so defenselessly in front of others.”

Next to Felicia, Gawain was prodding at a cake.

“…What’s wrong, Rintarou?” Nayuki was peering at his face from next to him.

“…” Upon witnessing this undisturbed scene…the corners of Rintarou’s eyes started to moisten.

“…? Your eyes are wet? …Were you crying?”

“Nah. It’s nothing.” Rintarou wiped his eyes and raised his face.

He looked around as his friends blinked back at him, wondering what was going on.

“It’s fine. This is a dream. I know. I’m fine.”

“…Rintarou?”

“That’s right. As long as I just have the Holy Grail…I can save this. I can make it reality. I know that… I do…”

Nayuki talked to him with a cheerful smile.

“…Yes, that’s right. The Holy Grail can make any wish come true. ‘Ask and ye shall receive’… It’s the ultimate treasure that can make that happen…”

“Yeah, of course. That’s why I need it.”

“Keep it up, Rintarou… It’s right there… Try your best, okay?”

“…Yeah, just wait, Nayuki. I’ll…”

…

Wince.

“Ow?!”

Pain shot up Sir Kay’s right palm…causing her to jump up and clutch her hand.

“Ow. Ow, ow, ow… What’s happening…?”

It was hard for her to figure out what was going on, since it was the middle of the night. She was in the depths of a forest—a makeshift campground, since they were in the middle of their search for the Holy Grail.

Her right palm felt lukewarm and slippery, as though it was wet.

When she held it in the light of the remaining embers…

“…I knew it.”

There was a bloody gash running through her palm. This wound was particularly deep.

It’s like I’d gripped firmly onto a naked blade…

Sir Kay had pieced together the reason for the wound that opened on her hand time and time again.

I’m sure this is a warning…though I don’t know who is trying to look out for me or what they’re trying to keep me away from…

She realized her heart was pounding.

The depth of the wound marked the gravity of the danger coming to attack them.

…I think…this is the turning point. After this, we can’t go back… We’re standing at a crossroads…

Sir Kay was thinking over the urgency and unusualness of her wound…

“So you’re awake, Sir Kay.” She heard a voice come from next to her. “Perfect timing. I was about to wake you.”

Luna was up, staring at something with a somewhat sheepish expression. She was looking at an old hawthorn Celtic cross.

It didn’t seem like the same one Luna had given to Rintarou as a present in the past.

“…Did something happen?”

Luna jerked her chin in one direction.

“…Rintarou?”

She pointed in the direction of his spot, which was unoccupied. His travel blanket was empty.

When she focused her eyes…she could see flashes of a golden light in the back of the woods. It was a light that Luna and Sir Kay recognized all too well.

“I-is that…?!”

“I think…I finally understand…where the Holy Grail is.” Luna gave the hawthorn cross a good squeeze. “Sir Kay, get ready to battle.”

Then, she picked up her own Excalibur, getting to her feet.

“We’ve reached the turning point…of this long search for the Holy Grail.”

Swsh, swsh, swsh… Luna and Sir Kay progressed into the forest.

They aimed for the golden light shining between the trees, walking slowly.

“You know, there were a lot of hints…,” Luna said from up ahead. “In ancient times, a line of strong knights and even King Arthur himself hadn’t been able to obtain it. Sir Galahad was the only one who succeeded… Why?”

“…”

“At every pit stop, we’re given some miraculous favor of the Holy Grail. Why did that happen?”

“…”

“We saw more miracles than we could count, wherever we went. Even though we got so close, we never actually could get to it… Why not?”

“…”

“And lastly, Dindrane—our guide who led Sir Galahad on the path of the Holy Grail… What was the last thing she said?”

“I will wait for you at this boat…”

“I think I’ve gotten to know the true nature of the Holy Grail. It’s something the knights of the legendary era and King Arthur wouldn’t have been able to obtain. And—”

Luna pulled something out from her shirt—the hawthorn Celtic cross.

That was the only evidence of her bond with her beloved retainer.

Luna wistfully looked at it…choking out her words.

“As he is now, Rintarou won’t be able to secure the Holy Grail. Well, maybe it’s more accurate to say we can’t get to it specifically because Rintarou is here. The only person capable of success is someone as pure as a child…”

Fwsh! Parting the dense forest, Luna and Sir Kay came into an open area.

It was a deserted lakeshore in the middle of a conifer thicket. Under the moonlight, this scenic view spread out before them…

“Luna?”

Rintarou was standing there, seeming somewhat off. Next to him was…

“…Oh, sorry. So you came for me… Sorry I left without saying anything.”

“…Rintarou.”

“I wasn’t trying to hide it. But you don’t have any memory of *her*, right?”

“…”

“I’ll introduce you. *This* used to be our friend, Nayuki Fuyuse.”

“Ha-ha-ha, it’s been so long, Luna… Well, I guess you don’t know who I am. Nice to meet you…I suppose…?”

“Don’t look so sad. Once we bring you back in the real world, it’ll all come back. They’ll regain their memories.”

“Th-that’s true, but…it’s just…well…”

“…” Luna was speechless, grimly staring at the *thing* next to Rintarou.

“We’re deep in the netherworld. Nayuki is part of the Dame du Lac…a human close to the Illusory World. At night…for a short time…he says she can come back to this world…but she’s like a ghost. I was scared at first, too.”

“Hey! How could you call me that?”

“I mean, right now, you look like a ghost. You’re see-through, too.”

“Hmph. You need to read up on how to treat a girl with respect. Keep it up, and Luna will eventually shun you.”

“Wh-why’re you mentioning her…?” Rintarou continued his conversation…

“L-Luna…?” Sir Kay looked nervously between Rintarou and Luna, blood draining from her face.

“……” Luna closed her eyes tightly, just once. “Hey, Rintarou…” She sounded determined to get through to him. “What is *that thing*…next to you?”

“…Huh? What…?” Rintarou looked beside him. “Like I said, that’s Nayuki Fuyuse. It’s Nayuki. I get why you’re so cautious, since she looks like a ghost, and you haven’t got any memories of her, but…”

“…Gh!” Luna ground her teeth as she glared at it.

Rintarou had just pointed to the Holy Grail, glittering gold.

“So…you’ve been influenced by it for a while…”

“Influenced…by what?”

Why hadn’t she noticed even though it had been right there in front of her? When she looked really closely, Rintarou’s eyes were empty. Though he looked sane…he had long since lost his sanity.

How could this have happened…? This is sick…! Luna scowled, detesting the culprit.

Of course the Holy Grail would always appear right in front of them as though it was a step ahead. That was because it had always been right there with them from the start.

Informing us that the treasure is hidden somewhere on this island? Well, you’re not wrong! Telling us that she’ll wait for us at the boat? Of course she would! Because it was already there!

Luna howled at him. “Rintarou! Open your eyes! And listen to the true nature of the Holy Grail!”

“Why are you talking about that…?”

“The Holy Grail is a treasure that embodies miracles! But you can’t get the Holy Grail for selfish reasons! That’s always been the rule!”

“Huh? Says who…?”

“Think back on it! The knights of the legendary era were seeking the Holy Grail for fortune or prestige. It was all for their own reputations and glory! That’s why they couldn’t obtain it! But those blessings bestowed on the villagers? Those happened because we were wishing for a miracle for other people! It was because we were trying to open the path with our own abilities! That’s why the Holy Grail would appear and grant us miracles!”

"……"

"It won't work any other way, Rintarou… We've already wished for the Holy Grail ourselves. Well, I never had any use for that stupid cup, and Sir Kay tagged along to protect me. But you've always wanted the Holy Grail… *for yourself*!"

"…N-no, you're wrong, Luna…"

Right then, Rintarou clutched his head as though he was in immense pain, staggering back one step, then two.

"I didn't want the Holy Grail for myself, either… I just wanted it to save Nayuki… I wanted it for someone other than myself…!"

"…No, no, Rintarou…" She looked at him with pity and pulled something out from her pocket.

It was the hawthorn Celtic cross.

"I wonder if it's because we're deep in a netherworld. I got a glimpse of the dream that you've been having… I think it's through our matching charms."

"…Huh?!"

"Sorry, Rintarou. I peeked into your past. I'm sorry… You put yourself through the wringer because of me… I'm really sorry…"

"Huh? Because of you? What are you talking about…?"

Without minding his bewilderment, Luna continued, "You've been suffering all this time, jaded about the world… You suffered so long you don't even remember the original memory that caused it in the first place… You finally secured a place where you belonged…which might crumble in on itself."

"…"

"I imagine you must have felt indescribably uneasy when you lost Nayuki in a place beyond your reach… Maybe you started to think your place of belonging was fragile, shattering under a single touch if you didn't expend your full powers to protect it. Maybe you've started to wonder if your abilities even amount to anything… After Nayuki's death, your sense of self started to crumble, making you anxious… Right?

"So you want to do anything to protect it—which could be accomplished by the absolute power of the Holy Grail. You would be able to bring Nayuki back to life. You would even be able to make me king. Naturally, you could protect everyone and your place in the world… That was why you craved it, desperately."

"…"

"Of course, you started this quest to save her. But at some point, you were captivated by the power of the Holy Grail. Or a small part of you in the bottom of your heart might have felt that way from the beginning. You wanted it to save your sense of belonging. Hence, you wanted the Holy Grail for yourself… Am I wrong?"

"……"

When Luna pointed that out, Rintarou ended up silent.

That was a more eloquent confirmation than any other.

“Hey, Rintarou… Let’s give up on the Holy Grail. You can’t succeed the way you are right now.”

That drove into Rintarou like a knife.

“H-hey… What are you talking about…? You’ve got to be joking… Are you telling me to give up on Nayuki…?” He seemed to seethe with anger.

“Please, Rintarou, wake up. There’s some sort of unknown *spite* in the Holy Grail. What you seek for yourself will never be obtainable… That makes it just a Zen riddle in a cup. I’m sure there’s something in the Holy Grail that we shouldn’t touch. I don’t know if it’s always been this way…or maybe it changed over time. But either way, a holy cup is just absurd. I’m sure it’s evil. Sir Galahad didn’t take it back to King Arthur but took it to heaven… Now that I think of it…”

“What’s your basis for saying this stuff…?!”

“*What is that thing* you’re talking to?!”

With eyes filled with enmity, Luna jabbed a finger at the space next to Rintarou.

The Holy Grail was right there.

Though its golden color had been beautiful in every other encounter, it looked like an ominous glow now.

“I’ve told you over and over…! This is Nayuki Fuyuse…”

“That’s a doppelgänger! As if I could stand by when there’s a holy cup prodding the weak spots of a person’s heart! You’ve been completely influenced by the netherworld created by the chalice! You seemed full of yourself when you told me that phrase: ‘When you look into the abyss, it looks back into you’!”

“No! I haven’t been manipulated! I’m in my right mind! I’m just about to get the Holy Grail! Nayuki agrees with me! As if I can give up now that I’ve gotten all the way here! I…I’m going to save Nayuki… I’m going to protect you guys…! I won’t let you be taken away again!”

At that moment, as if reacting to his wishes…the Holy Grail glittered even more and changed form.

Upon closer inspection, the light seemed strange. Though its radiance was blinding, there was something dark about it.

A girl slipped out from the golden light—someone with fluttering, glowing blue hair. She was the one Luna and the others had once called “Nayuki.”

However, her originally blue irises had been stained bloodred, and clinging to her body was a jet-black wedding dress.

It was Dark Nayuki. Appearing in front of them, she could only be described in that way.

“That’s right, Rintarou… Don’t let them trick you. They’re demons…” She hugged Rintarou from the side and smiled beguilingly as she whispered.

“That explains it…”

“Don’t you know? The most common cause of death on this quest in the ancient era was friendly fire… They destroyed themselves, tricked by the demons that appeared at their locations…”

Rintarou held his head and groaned painfully. “Yeah…I’m fine…like I’d let anything trick me…”

“You’re not fine at all! You’re being fooled!”

“Don’t lend an ear to the demons. If you keep this up, Rintarou, your friends will be taken from you… You need to help Luna and the others. Take a close look at that disgusting form…”

They had no idea what Rintarou was seeing.

As he watched Luna and Sir Kay, his eyes were colored by disgust, storming from the inside.

“…Dammit! Shit! I see! That’s how it’s been all along…! Where did Luna go…?!”

Shing. Rintarou pulled out his swords and readied them.

It didn’t take long for him to express his murderous intent. The tension was palpable.

…This is no good… Luna sighed at the development she’d had a slight premonition of.

I can’t believe Rintarou, of all people, would be duped so easily…

If she rephrased it…

…He must have been that worried deep in his heart…

That was probably Rintarou Magami’s singular weakness.

After a tough solitary life, he wanted to protect and get back the sense of belonging he’d finally obtained.

The fear of losing that…was the Achilles’ heel in Rintarou’s heart.

The Holy Grail had prodded it with malice.

“…Luna? What should we do…?” Sir Kay had drawn her sword, feeling a turbulent sense of foreboding as she quietly asked Luna.

“…” Luna thought about their options.

She glanced at Dark Nayuki.

The figure was still hugging Rintarou, laughing through her bewitching smile. Her eyes seemed to pierce through Luna as though mocking her.

There’s no way something that repulsive could be the Nayuki Rintarou wanted to protect… There’s definitely something wrong with the Holy Grail… No. The power of the Holy Grail itself was real…which means it must have been possessed by some unknown evil…

Luna was convinced…

Someone was watching them.

She thought she felt the eyes of something that moved deep in the darkness, observing them.

"…" Luna started to think again.

Well? What was she supposed to do? What should she do?

Would she keep trying to persuade Rintarou, believing she could get through to him?

Would she look for another method and withdraw for now?

Luna thought about her options—long and hard.

After all that thinking, she came to one conclusion…

"…Rintarou." Luna unsheathed her Excalibur in one fluid motion. "Let me say one thing. You're full of shit."

"…What did you say?"

"I said you're full of BS!"

With quiet rage in her eyes, Luna looked straight at Rintarou.

"Who are you supposed to be serving? Me, right? Do you think you can change loyalties like that? You're *my* vassal! I'm supposed to be *your* lord! Not the Holy Grail! Get ahold of yourself and open your eyes!"

"Huh? What're you saying…?"

"Well? Your place is by my side! To protect that space for yourself, you started to look toward the Holy Grail for strength instead of me! You tried to *protect your place* using the Holy Grail's power! Which means *you worshipped its power over mine*! Tell me something more traitorous than that!"

"……Gh!"

"Hey, Rintarou! Do you really think I'm unreliable? Do you distrust me so much that you're worried I might fall apart without that Holy Grail?! Am I—" Luna raged up to that point… "…No… Right… That's it."

She might have remembered something. Luna calmed down again.

"There's a reason you can't immediately believe in my powers… There's a reason you serve the Holy Grail over me… It's totally expected, now that I thought of it. Even though you never indicated it, it's proven by your anxieties and despair… It was none other than I who made you this way…"

"…Huh?"

"And you've been carrying me on your back through this entire King Arthur Succession Battle… Our final score for our sword fights was zero to 113. Not once did I win against you. I suppose that *would* make you take the Holy Grail's side over me…"

"Sword fights? Y-you're a demon… I don't understand what you're talking about."

Luna thrust the end of her sword at Rintarou, who was perturbed by his inability to process this information. "I'll prove it to you—right here and

right now! I'll make you remember! I'll make you remember who you should be serving! And—"

"Pfft! Shut up! Who would follow someone as weak as you?!"

"If you wanna make me your underling, you've got to do it after winning against me!"

"I'll prove…that I'm the best king in the world, suitable of having you as my vassal."

That was probably the only way.

The anxieties in his heart were clouding his eyes. To clear his mind from worry, all she could do was show her power. To put it bluntly, she needed to beat the crap out of him until he returned to his senses.

"This is a match, Rintarou! I'm going to wake you up!"

"Y-you're…?" Rintarou didn't seem too sure about what he wanted to do…

"No, Rintarou! You can't listen to that demon!"

As though to protect him, Dark Nayuki went in front.

"Remember! Aren't you going to save me with the Holy Grail?! You're going to protect everyone precious to you, right?! You can't let it delude you!" Dark Nayuki raised her hands.

The black mana throughout her body became an Aura that flooded her and swirled upward. The arctic chill around her whirled into a blizzard, storming the area. In an instant, the temperature dropped below freezing, and the dense trees were frosted white, crumbling with sharp cracks.

"Gah?!"

The violent storm approached Luna as though it was about to swallow her…

"Hyaaaah!"

That was when it happened.

Like a flash of lightning from the side, Sir Kay headed at Dark Nayuki and slashed at her.

"—Gh?!" Dark Nayuki immediately spawned an ice sword to block Sir Kay's blow.

As that happened, she lost her focus, dispersing the frost that tried to engulf Luna.

"Luna, I'll handle her!" Sir Kay stared back at Dark Nayuki over their crossed swords.

"Sir Kay…?!"

"I've been thinking about why I serve as your Jack! About why I'm at your side!" Sir Kay expressed her mind as though she was in agony. "I've been troubled this whole time! That all I could do was be by Arthur's side… That was it—the entire meaning of my existence…! I thought I didn't contribute to anything, whether I was there or not…!"

Sir Kay counterattacked with her sword.

Maybe she caught Dark Nayuki off guard, because she ducked, withdrawing from Sir Kay's sword, which should have been inferior in

ability. As she quickly went into pursuit, Sir Kay let out a cry while relentlessly swinging her sword at the apparition.

“Back during the legendary era, I was jealous of Merlin… I was jealous of Sir Lancelot, Sir Lamorak, and Sir Tristan… I was jealous of Sir Gawain, who after so many issues, Arthur still had faith in! I was jealous of everyone at the Round Table! I knew I’d never become like them! But I haven’t given up! That was the lot I’d been dealt!

“Even in the *current era*! I’m sure Rintarou should be by your side—not me! He’s the one to pave the way for your royal road! So I won’t ask you for anything! It’s fine even if I can’t walk by your side… I don’t need prestige, fame, or glory! I’m fine with being a stone on the road that you and Rintarou walk on! I’m fine just observing you from slightly afar… I want this for the sake of the two of you—!”

To a knight who sought prestige and fame, who valued glory, who believed that serving a king was the supreme honor, that must have been a difficult decision. Regardless, it was Sir Kay’s choice. She had decided her own fate.

“Please let me do this! As someone who seeks nothing, I can fight just this once! I think the reason I became a Jack might have been for today, for this moment in time! So you focus on Rintarou!”

Sir Kay swung her sword at Dark Nayuki, slicing through the air like a gale.

As long as one wasn’t seeking it for themselves, the Holy Grail would lend its strength to the person. It would ensnare people with those miracles.

As though responding to Sir Kay’s wishes, golden light engulfed the knight, boosting her with more power than usual.

“Hyaaaaah!”

“Guh?!”

Sir Kay’s sword and Dark Nayuki’s ice sword crossed. The one who should have been at a big disadvantage was now rivaling Dark Nayuki.

“N-Nayuki?!” Rintarou ran to try to help her.

“Don’t make me tell you again. I’m your opponent.” Luna stood in his way, gaining confidence from Sir Kay’s resolve.

“Dammit… You’ve got to be kidding me…! So that’s how you demons steal things…steal my friends…steal my place in the world…! Cut it out!”

ZWOOSH! Rintarou released his Fomorian power.

An Aura darker than darkness flowed through him, transforming him into a giant.

That’s right… Kill…kill her.

Right here, right now. Fulfill thine bestowed destiny.

A voice that could induce shudders came out of nowhere.

I created thou for this time.

Get her. Kill her.

The voice came down between them.

I am the “one to select the king.”

And I am also the “one to kill the king.”

From the beginning, I was created from that wish. I am one to fulfill my fate.

Never to heed however many moons pass, how many times I am reborn. My destiny will always be realized.

All circumstances, all reasons, all emotions…

Like the deluge of a muddy stream, all will be absorbed, allowing fate to converge.

Thou “selected the king” in accordance with thy fate.

Then thou “must kill the king” in accordance with thy fate.

Fulfill fate. Thou must go through with thy destiny.

On my name, thou art commanded…

By I, who am thy father, my name is The Evil Eyed—

“*SHUT UP*!” Luna roared at the voice that pelted them, warding it off. “This is an issue between me and Rintarou! I don’t know who you are, but don’t stick your nose in someone else’s business!”

Then, without fear, without flinching, she readied her sword and charged at Rintarou. “Let’s go, Rintarou! Hyaaaah!”

Her sword, released with all her strength and spirit…

“Aaaaaah!”

…and Rintarou’s blades, piercing forward as he roared like a beast…

…The weapons hit each other straight-on and leveled the area around them.

CHAPTER 6

A Promise Between the Two

In a certain place, in the cover of deep darkness…

"…It's finally begun." The dark witch grinned. "Thus, a certain sorcerer who served the king turns his sword on the king he loved…"

Pivoting on her heel to dance, she continued to smile.

"Ruling over the people, the singular turning point makes the people into the people, *rex quondam, rexque futuras,* King Arthur… *Chosen by the one to select the king and killed by the one who chose the king.* The one cursed to play that role is that sorcerer—the plot of fate. Though he attempts to fight against it, though he follows through with all manners of events, at the end of the twists and turns, ultimately, he shall always end with the same finale."

Like a director whose coordinated production was going as planned on stage, she beamed.

"Because she is killed by the sorcerer, the world is forever deprived of a king to rule the people. That is the script a certain old god penned… A curse. Now, now. A slow eternity has passed. The conclusion of the Grand Guignol performance is finally here. Please do enjoy yourselves."

—

In the kitchen of Logres Manor, Emma lined up teacups on the table, polishing them clean.

CRICK!

"Oh…"

Some teacups on the table cracked, even though they were undisturbed.

They were Rintarou's and Luna's favorites.

"…But…why…?"

Emma inspected those cracked cups in a daze. With an uneasy expression, she looked out the window.

"…Master… Luna…"

As though to reflect what was inside her heart, the clouds outside the window gathered and seemed as though they might rain any minute now…

—

"You might not remember, but—"

Luna's long legs kicked off the ground as she stepped forward. Quick as an arrow, she charged straight at Rintarou.

In a moment, she shortened the distance between them, feinting to the left twice and to the right once.

She whipped her arm from one side to the other like a dragon's tail, assaulting the top of Rintarou's head.

It was like lightning crawling along the ground had leaped toward the heavens.

CLING! The metallic squeal was met with sparks.

"…You demon!" Rintarou raised his swords and crossed them above his head to stop her blow.

He violently swung a kick at her stomach in return. It should have destroyed her guts on contact, but it was instantly blocked by Luna's left elbow. She was sent flying on impact.

"That technique was from our seventh battle. When I lost my temper because I couldn't win against you, it was my trump card," Luna muttered after she had been hurled to the side. "…That takes me back. You did it the same way back then, Rintarou."

The only difference was that they had been playing as children back then. Now it was a battle to the death.

As she was overcome by nostalgia, Luna grinned even in this situation.

"Hyah!" She kicked off a tree and twisted her body to force herself back onto the ground.

Then she went right into skidding her soles and left knee along the ground, trying to stifle her momentum. She quickly somersaulted backward, readied her sword again, and looked at Rintarou.

"Huh?!"

He wasn't there. Rintarou was gone.

As soon as Luna realized that…

SHF, SHF, SHF, SHF! She heard something coming from the left where the conifer trees were packed together. Luna immediately reacted, turning her attention to the left.

"—Gh!"

From the shadow of an evergreen to the right of her, Rintarou lunged at Luna. He attacked like an assassin: swiftly, quickly, and silently. He had perfectly synced his distraction and attack. Luna couldn't do anything. The two swords crossed her neck like scissors.

But the blades cut through thin air.

"Phew!" Luna just barely managed to evade them.

A few sections of her blond locks had been shorn, strands floating in the air. Abandoning them, she tumbled forward.

"Hyaaaaah!" Luna leaped up from the momentum, jumping back to a standing position…

"Raaaaaaaaaaah!" Rintarou pursued her right at the same moment, closing the distance between them.

BAAAM! When he whirled around like a tornado and tried to clip her with his swords, he crashed into her blade, which she readied with both hands.

The impact sent her flying. Her back smacked into the base of a tree.

“Right… You were always good at pinpointing my weaknesses…” For a moment, Luna smiled, even though she was short of breath. “…You’d throw a rock and distract someone or…launch a surprise attack from the shadows of the trees… Even though I kept telling you to stop since it was unfair, you never listened…”

“What’re you mumbling about?!” He charged at Luna as she muttered against the tree trunk.

Rintarou’s speed was already nothing short of mystical. His whole body was charged with his black Aura, and he loomed over her as he charged, trying to crush her.

“Raaaaaaah!” Moving as fast as the wind, he swung his two swords at Luna.

In an instant, he left behind countless afterimages of his flashing swords, tearing space into infinite pieces—a ferocious onslaught. Had she been a normal person, she would have been disassembled into four parts at her first breath and, in the next breath, into eight, then into sixteen in the next. She would have been cut into exponentially smaller pieces by the preternatural rotations of his blades.

In response to that blender from hell…

“Rintarou!” Luna let her blades dance through the air like his, cutting into him again and again and again and again and again!

Every time she cut through the air, the impact of her sword would jerk her back, making her body lurch. When she would receive an attack, Luna was repelled back.

Blade met blade. They were making enough shock waves to make the air ripple.

Although she hadn’t been hit directly, her internal organs and brain were taking serious damage from the impacts.

“Gah!” She vomited blood, but continued to parry again and again and again.

She raised her sword, brought it back, cut again.

“Gaaaaaaaaah!” Losing all semblance of sanity, he did not give her a shred of mercy or pardon. Intensifying his impact and speed, he attacked Luna—pursuing her with his infinite power boosts.

The shock waves started to form a whirlpool, looking for a route of escape, blasting around the two to level the trees.

“Guh!” Even as she was feeling hazy, Luna kept herself conscious through sheer willpower. “Th-that’s right… This is the scariest thing about you! You can get so reckless with your absurd abilities and quash everything! I’ve been frustrated so many times by you!”

“Shut uuuuup!” He used all his strength to bring down his sword, trying to cut her off short.

The pressure from the sword seemed enough to practically take the whole atmosphere with it…

“HYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

…But it missed Luna when she used all her strength to leap into the air.

The destructive attack brushed by the soles of her shoes as she barely rose above it.

From the corners of her eyes, Luna watched the extra momentum split the trees in half right to their roots, and she kicked off the pulverized branches to fly even higher into the air. She grabbed a branch from a tree near her with one hand and somersaulted to land on top of it. She looked down at Rintarou, sounding like she was enjoying herself. “This is your style, too. That takes me back… When I first saw it, I thought you were a monkey or something.”

“Dammit…! You just keep moving around…!” Rintarou spat, livid, unlike her. “You demon…! I haven’t got a clue what you’ve been babbling about…! Why are you smiling like nothing’s wrong…?!”

Luna checked her own condition. Well, she was in terrible shape. Though it hadn’t been long since they started their battle, she was already battered.

Because she knew how Rintarou used a sword, she hadn’t sustained any direct damage. However, everything else had already brought Luna to death’s doorstep.

In contrast, Rintarou was unscathed. Unlike her ragged panting, his breathing was practically silent.

And his fighting style was overwhelmingly better. He was just too good.

Though at first glance, it looked like he ignored proper sword fighting techniques and acted on instinct, his sword handling had a foundation that no ordinary person could compare to.

This was Merlin’s sword. It was the sword of the one who had been exalted as the world’s strongest sorcerer and a peerless soldier.

She couldn’t win. He had made Luna aware of that bitter truth.

Yes, his sword protected me so many times up until now. I can’t believe how terrifying it is now that I’m up against him.

She would be struck down by Rintarou’s own hand. She would probably die.

The realization didn’t dawn on her through logic; she could feel it in her very soul. Her survival instincts screamed at her to stop.

But regardless of that…

“…Ha-ha-ha.” For some reason, Luna couldn’t hold back the laughter that spilled out of her.

That’s right. As she was now…

“Hey, demon! What’s supposed to be so funny?!”

“Oh, sorry.” Luna jumped. She landed with a light thud on the ground and turned back to Rintarou. “…It’s just, I don’t know… It’s been fun.”

“Huh?” Rintarou cocked his head to the side with deadpan eyes.

“…It reminded me of the past. It’s been so long since I crossed swords with you… It’s kind of like we went back to those times…” Luna shrugged her battered shoulders. “Well, back then, you weren’t radiating cold murder like you are right now.”

“Like I said, I’ve got no clue what you’ve been talking about…! I don’t know you…!” Scratching his head, he stared at Luna with eyes muddy with hatred. “…Stop, demon…! Stop smiling while mimicking my friend’s shape…! Don’t joke like you know me…! It’s sick…!”

Then, Rintarou’s eyes glinted with madness as he started to walk toward Luna.

It was like the march of an executioner about to carry out a death sentence.

“I’m…going to save Nayuki…! I’m going to protect everyone…! I’m going…to make Luna king…! So…!”

Rintarou raised his swords, kicked at the ground, and sprinted.

“Shut up! You idiot!”

Luna raised her sword and ran.

The distance between them got dangerously short.

“You know what, maybe Luna doesn’t actually want that!” she barked.

Their swords bit into each other fiercely from close up.

Over their crossed swords, they glared at each other.

“The reason I want to become king…! Why I wanted to become king…! Was just—”

“—Gh?!”

“Rintarou! You can’t save Nayuki the way you are now! But I’m sure I can save her! So believe! Have faith in me! No, I’ll *make* you believe in me!” Luna earnestly yelled.

“Huh?!”

Then, the two of them stopped locking blades and leaped away from each other.

“Shut up, demon!”

“HYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

They once again clashed, sword against sword.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

The mad cackle of a girl rang through the forest.

“Guuuuh!” A woman groaned in agony.

Both disappeared into the sound of a raging blizzard.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Die! Perish!”

When Dark Nayuki raised both her hands…ice lances rushed at Sir Kay like a meteor shower, plunging down on her head. It was a total surface attack.

She couldn’t evade them. She could only strike them down.

“Ngaaaaaah!”

Sir Kay swung her sword over and over and over—breaking, blocking, striking the ice lances that closed in, ready to skewer her.

They shattered like glass, tearing through her skin to rob warmth from her. However, she had evaded the fatal ones. All Sir Kay could do was keep hitting them down.

“Ahhhhhhhhh?!”

Eventually…

“Haaah…?! Haaaah…?! *Wheeze*!”

Sir Kay was frostbitten—a mess of wounds. Her breathing was ragged as she used her sword in place of a cane.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re so pathetic, Sir Kay! And you call yourself a knight of the Round Table?” Dark Nayuki seemed to enjoy herself, sauntering through the snow-laden forest. “It’s unexpected that you could surpass so many knights of the Round Table and fight your way to this point.”

“…”

“You really don’t seek anything from the Holy Grail, huh? That’s why you can receive its blessing and fight without being overwhelmed by it… That’s amazing in its own right.”

“…”

“But what does that mean for you as a knight?”

Dark Nayuki smiled disdainfully at Sir Kay, who desperately focused on steadying her breath.

“I mean, a knight is supposed to seek prestige and prize glory, right?”

“…”

“There’s no way you don’t want anything. I’m sure even you have something you want… I imagine you’ve given up, right? Since you’re so weak.”

That had to be a trap.

“Look, Sir Kay… Back in the legendary era, when King Arthur pulled Excalibur from the stone anvil…when your father Sir Ector asked, ‘Who pulled the sword from the stone?’ how did you reply? ‘Father, I pulled it. So there is no doubt that I am king of this land.’”

Dark Nayuki lured her—cleverly.

“You must have something. You seek prestige and glory… Just remember it… No need to pretend… You don’t need to deceive yourself…”

Just as she had cunningly ensnared Rintarou.

“‘Ask and ye shall receive’… The Holy Grail will make it come true… Now, Sir Kay…take my hand…and then the glory will be yours… It’s something you never gave up wishing for, but long ago gave up on… Isn’t that lovely…?”

Her voice was incredibly terrifying.

Sir Kay knew she had to be cautious. She knew it was dangerous.

Dark Nayuki’s tone was sweet, wistful, and soft. If one got careless, it could slowly melt one’s vigilance, and the voice would slip through the gaps in one’s heart…

Back in that era, this was why Sir Lancelot, Sir Gawain, Sir Palamedes, Sir Ywain, Sir Lionel, Sir Agravain, Sir Gaheris, Sir Tristan, Sir Brunor, Sir Mordred, Sir Gareth, Sir Hector de Maris, Sir Ironside, and Sir Pelleas—why all those proud, important knights—had not been able to obtain the Holy Grail.

“…That’s odd,” Sir Kay answered, feeling calmer than she expected. “There is a certain charm to your words. But they don’t resonate with me, to the point it’s weird even to me.”

“…Huh?!” Dark Nayuki blinked at her.

“…Even back when my brother-in-law pulled that chosen sword out…all I could think was ‘I don’t want to burden my brother with the responsibility of being king.’ You know, I was dubious of my motivations and thought I was putting on airs, but…what a relief. I confirmed it from your words. There was no falsehood to my words. I’ve always been who I am from the start.”

“…What? What are you…?” Dark Nayuki’s face immediately soured when Sir Kay looked so proud. “You’re like *that person*…”

“Like who?”

“That doesn’t concern you. I don’t want to even remember it. That vexing little snot! I’ve lured them many times in the past, but it was like I could never get through—to that knight who was so perfect they were like fiction!” Dark Nayuki clucked her tongue in annoyance. “You’ve got me… This seems like it would take time…just when the *bastard child* has graced us with his appearance, but…I need to lure him into killing the king… I shouldn’t be letting such an insignificant little knight get in my way…”

“…Oh! What…did you just say?” Sir Kay set her sights on Dark Nayuki. “It is certainly true that the Holy Grail is something that would be difficult for an ordinary person to obtain. But…I doubt the sacred vessel that collected Christ’s blood could be so vile as to entrap people in this way… What in the world are you?!”

Dark Nayuki replied with a bewitching smile. “Do you know of the four Érenn treasures?”

“According to the Irish *Lebor Gabála Érenn* mythology, they were possessed by the clan of gods, the Danann… There was Nuada’s sword, Lugh’s spear, the stone of fate, Lia Fáil, and the Dagda’s cauldron…”

“Yes, and when the Danann decided to leave the world to the humans, they had the Dame du Lac hand down those treasures on your realm. They changed name and form to become the Excalibur, the Lance of Longinus, the sacred stone—or rather the Round Table—and the Holy Grail.”

“…?”

“But there were those who objected to the Danann. They tweaked the Dagda’s cauldron—the Holy Grail—to accomplish a certain goal. That handiwork was…me, I suppose? Through Rintarou’s influence, I’ve gained this form.”

“…What…in the world are you saying…?”

“I suppose that’s enough teasing before I send you to your doom.”

Suddenly, Dark Nayuki’s figure ballooned in size, darkening. A dense black Aura rose from her slim figure. Her body transformed. She was no longer in the form of a sweet girl. She was the incarnation of darkness itself.

Sir Kay was already familiar with the identity of that dark power…

“?! Th-that’s *Fomorian Transformation*?! Why can you use that?!” Sir Kay couldn’t hide her fear and agitation. “Wh-why do you have Rintarou’s power?!”

“I’m not sure you’d call it *his* power. To be accurate, it’s my *true form’s* ability… All I’m doing is lending him a portion of it…”

As that dark Aura coiled around her whole body, Dark Nayuki raised her hand. Black flames blazed to the heavens and enclosed the surrounding area in darkness, blotting out their surroundings. A giant eyeball cracked open in the sky.

It looked down at Sir Kay as she gulped.

“Eep.”

“Hee-hee-hee, aren’t you lucky? If I had my true form…*that would have killed you*…”

Sir Kay shuddered as Dark Nayuki—the evil presence that had turned into something else—started to smile, slowly walking toward her.

“Now…this is it. Good-bye to the weakest knight of the Round Table…the knight who served no use… Heh-heh-heh…”

The shadows, the darkness, the massive umbra coiled up and turned into a tsunami.

Sir Kay swung her sword in resistance, but she was easily swallowed up by it.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Rintarou roared, swinging his sword.

“Guh!”

Luna barely received it with her readied blade, but…her knee was starting to buckle under the transcendental pressure from Rintarou’s weapons.

“Gwah!” She didn’t even have time to spit out the blood that slowly collected in her mouth.

“Take thaaaaaaaaaaat!”

Like a sudden thunderstorm, Rintarou’s swords came down on her.

“Guh?!” Luna leaped to the side and evaded them.

Several of the attacks grazed Luna and cut through her fair skin.

FLSHT! Blood streaked through the air.

BAM! Luna leaned back, letting the large tree behind her prop her up.

“How could you disfigure a damsel…? You better take responsibility for this.”

Rintarou didn’t listen to her retort and charged the black lightning that tore through the sky in the tip of his raised sword. He unleashed its energy at Luna.

“Excuse you…I’m not that great at magic…,” she complained, blurting out magic words and developing a barrier in front of her eyes with her Aura.

It blocked the lightning that approached, ripping the atmosphere to shreds.

Thunder clapped. She heard an impact and a blast.

The large tree behind her turned to carbon, blown to bits. At the center of the explosion where the flickering black light and fumes lingered…

“Guh.”

…was Luna, who had crossed her arm and sword in the shape of an X and narrowly powered through it.

However, her body was already battered, which meant she was effectively a corpse. Even now, the slight amounts of black lightning creeping around her body were eating away at her.

Half her body was paralyzed. She didn’t have sensation in those parts anymore.

“You’re still holding on, demon…?! I was trying to erase you from existence!”

Facing her was Rintarou, glaring at Luna with maddened eyes as he approached her…one step at a time.

The outcome of the fight had already been decided. Luna was already driven into a corner.

…He’s strong. Rintarou is too strong… He isn’t someone I could win against… I knew that…since he’s always been amazing.

With labored breath, she tried to calm her pounding heart a little as she let her mind race through her memories.

But…

“Pfft! Shut up! Who would follow someone as weak as you?!”

“If you wanna make me your underling, you’ve got to do it after winning against me!”

“I have to win at least once…! Or I won’t have any qualifications to make you my vassal!” She used the back of her hand to rub away the blood at the corner of her mouth.

She cleared away her paralysis with her spirit and readied her sword once again.

“Huh?!”

Was she seriously thinking about challenging him again? Rintarou’s expression said it all. He stopped walking.

“…Why? Why are you holding out to this point? You’re just a demon…”

“I…” Luna suddenly let her lips curl. “…I already told you. It’s because I want to prove it to you! Duh! …I need you to know I’m fit to be your king.”

“…What…does that mean…? I don’t get it…”

Luna continued to talk. “Hey, Rintarou. Don’t serve the Holy Grail. The one you should be serving is right here. I’ll prove that to you right now. I can save the people who are important to you, too. I’ll protect them for you… So don’t believe in the Holy Grail… Believe in me.”

Luna gripped the hawthorn cross that hung from her neck and desperately appealed to him. “Until you recognize me as your king…I’ll face you—even if it’s a million times…! I’ll keep going until I win! So…!

“—Next time, I’ll win! I definitely will! Even if I don’t, I’ll fight you no matter how many times I need to until I win! I’ll do it until you recognize me! So—”

“…Huh?!” Rintarou clutched his throbbing head.

In front of his eyes, Luna had been overlaid with someone from a nostalgic memory lurking in the deep recesses of his mind. For a moment, the glint of madness and hatred in Rintarou’s eyes dulled.

“…Rintarou?”

“…Wow… There used to be somebody who told me the same thing and kept coming at me even though she never won…I think…”

“!”

“I don’t know…when…or where…or who that was…?” He writhed in pain. “…That’s stupid. Why am I thinking about it now? I need to beat this demon…! This isn’t the right moment to be thinking of other things…! But… I feel like…it was kind of…important…?”

Luna saw hope in Rintarou’s reaction.

This could work… It just might! Rintarou hasn’t been completely absorbed by the Holy Grail! I can pull him back to reality! If I keep going like this…!

Luna squeezed out the last of her strength and tried to focus her energy into the hand gripping her sword.

“You can’t do that, Rintarou.”

Concentrated darkness and frost approached from the scorched back of the forest.

“You can’t listen to that demon’s cajolery… All you need to think about is getting the Holy Grail… With it, you can get anything you wish for.”

Dark Nayuki had appeared in front of the two of them.

B-but…why is she here?!

This was bad. Things were not looking good.

Dark Nayuki’s words were like narcotics to Rintarou when he wasn’t in his right mind.

If that thing was around, Luna couldn’t bring Rintarou back to his senses.

What is that anyway? What is that repulsive thing…?!

Shadows stretched behind the cryptic figure. Nothing existed beyond her. Dark Nayuki eroded the world as though she was darkness itself.

Then, Luna realized *something*.

“Wait… Where’s Sir Kay…? Where did Sir Kay go…?!” Luna shrieked, failing to disguise her panic.

Dark Nayuki told Luna cruelly, smiling slightly, “…Her? Hee-hee. She was absorbed. She’s nowhere now.”

“…Ngh?!”

“For starters, why would you assign that unredeemable knight to deal with me? You can be so cruel with your orders…”

Then, without any footsteps, the concentrated darkness sidled up to Rintarou…

“Now, Rintarou, all you have to do is finish off that demon… The Holy Grail is right there… It’s so close… Everything you wished for is in your grasp…”

“…Ugh…Nayuki…I—I…”

Rintarou’s eyes, which had been in the process of regaining some of their sanity, once again went dull. They were soaked with the tainted color of darkness and chaos…

“Right…I…*I*…”

“Rintarou…?! Don’t let her trick you! Hold it together!”

“I don’t…want to…be *alone* anymore…so…I’ll *take* the Holy Grail…*I’ll*…”

Luna’s pleas were in vain.

“I—I—I—I—I?!” Rintarou started his final charge toward Luna.

…Guh…?! I…can’t move…!

When she realized it, the darkness had spread through the world. At some point, it encroached on her body. Her limbs had been caught by the shadows. She couldn’t move them at all.

Luna was at her limit. Because they were deep in a netherworld, her spirit surpassed her physical body. As long as her heart didn’t waver, her body was immortal. However, even accounting for all of that, Luna was well past her limit.

Time stretched infinitely after she had been pushed to her spiritual extremes.

Luna could barely stand by using her sword in place of a cane. Even as she was faced with Rintarou’s crawling approach, she couldn’t move an inch.

…I’m going to die.

……I’m going to be killed.

I can’t win. I’m going to be killed by Rintarou?

Was I not enough?

She had become despondent, nihilistic.

Was I not fit to be Rintarou’s king? Or did I not have the capacity to be king…to begin with…?

Rintarou approached.

That’s not true…! That’s impossible! I haven’t lost yet! I haven’t lost! But…!

Luna couldn’t move.

Even if her heart didn’t bend, her body was immobile—she couldn’t lift a finger.

“RAAAAAAAAH!”

“Rin…tarou!”

His swords mercilessly came down on her head.

—

A sharp pain.

It shot up her right palm. She felt lukewarm blood dripping from her hand. Only that kept Sir Kay's consciousness grounded as she melted into the gloom.

She was in the dark, deep and dense.

She had nothing to rely on. Even her five senses served no use. She was in a space of nothingness. Feeling her own body steadily become one with the void, Sir Kay could only weep about her regrets.

"…I'm sorry…I'm sorry, Luna…I…couldn't protect you…"

Her body had already half gone.

The pain from her wound barely kept her tethered to her sense of self… and she was close to her limit.

Sir Kay couldn't do anything anymore.

"…Is it no use? I have nothing… I can't do anything… I want to protect the people who are important to me… I want to see where they end up…but was it beyond me to even wish for that?"

Her laments vanished into the crushing darkness.

"I seek nothing, so I couldn't obtain power… It's no wonder I can't do anything…so I really am a failure as a knight…? What in the world…am I here for…?"

Sir Kay's existence was slowly being crushed.

"Is that true? I think it's fine to have a knight like you around."

A voice had made it to Sir Kay's ears as she was melting into the darkness.

It was a girl's voice. It was a voice she remembered hearing recently.

Well…it was a voice she had heard far in the past, too.

Sir Kay looked around. Of course, it was all just the abyss, and no one was around.

"It's true that knights prize prestige and seek glory. They accomplish deeds for the sake of their kings, rewarded with the love of ladies. For those purposes, they polish their fighting skills and risk their lives going on hunts… Nothing could make a knight prouder. That was the way all knights should have been in the legendary era."

She could only hear that voice. It seemed to flood directly into her mind.

"Is that the only way a knight can be? Can't a knight just protect the ones they love without seeking anything…? Isn't that another role they can serve? …I think so."

That voice…was one she had encountered many times. It belonged to the mysterious cloaked girl.

"…Why are you here now…? Who are you…?" Sir Kay asked.

"…It's so nice seeing you again, Sir Kay," a slightly mischievous voice said to her. "Do you not remember me? …When I joined the Round Table, you gave me the special treatment."

"…Huh?"

“When I sought to join the Round Table, you came right up to me, right? You said, ‘I’ll test whether this stranger is fitting for the Round Table…’ In the end, I beat you to a pulp right in front of everyone… Good times…”

“Whaaaat?!”

“You know, I look up to you. When all the other knights didn’t make a move because they were too afraid of the power of a newcomer like me and losing their prestige…you were the only one thinking of protecting King Arthur. That’s why you didn’t even fear making a fool of yourself in front of everyone and challenged me… Right?”

“Th-that was…”

“Because of the way you are…I think that’s certainly why I was able to contact you like this at the eleventh hour… I mean, you and I are birds of a feather.”

“……You couldn’t be…?”

There was one person she could think the owner of the voice could be.

Someone who had been so silent during that time that Sir Kay could count the number of times she had heard this voice. Because of that, she hadn’t made the connection…but now she finally pieced it together.

“…I’m very happy that a knight like you has acknowledged my way of being. But it’s no good… I didn’t have the power to protect anyone the way you do.”

“…That may be true. People in this world are each born with their own roles. I’m sure you weren’t born to fight.”

“I knew that. But I…,” Sir Kay muttered as though she was lamenting.

“‘Ask and ye shall receive,’” said the voice.

“…Huh?”

“By that, I don’t mean you should be honest about your worldly desires. The most noble of hearts is one that doesn’t succumb to fear, one that disregards fate and born power—all to carry out what is to be done. God lends a hand to those with that strength. In that regard, you are that strong. You were not disheartened by your own weakness and continued to walk the path you decided you must… You’ve earned that right.”

Suddenly, something gleamed in front of Sir Kay’s eyes. It was a boorish and completely ordinary sword complete with a sheath. The blade was surprisingly normal.

…But she had seen it somewhere before.

“This is the very sword I used.”

“It couldn’t be…”

“The ‘sword of the most virtuous knight.’ That’s what it was called.”

“—Gh?!”

“Genesis 3:24. ‘So God drove man out and left a cherubim and a flaming sword tracing a ring on the east side of the Garden of Eden to guard the way to the tree of life…’ This blade ultimately is no sword. It is a ‘sword ill-befit of being one’ that was made to protect something. I give this to you.”

“…This is the ‘sword of the most virtuous knight’…? That blade that can only be drawn from the sheath and used by the chosen one…?”

In the past, Sir Balin had managed to do it. Because he had used the sword for his own purposes, he had been cursed, fell to his ruin, and met a wretched end. After that, no one on the Round Table had been able to recreate his actions. With the exception of the Round Table’s thirteenth seat —the female knight in the perilous seat.

“But…I can’t use something like that. It’s beyond me…”

“No, I believe you should be able to use it.” The voice seemed certain. “Sir Kay…please protect the king…the true king you serve… Right now, they’re trying to lock the world in darkness. Since the distant past, they have set their steady sights on the human world. A line of ancient evil gods created a destiny where the planet will be destroyed… At present, they seek to fulfill their ambitions, trying to absorb this world.”

“But…what do you mean by that, *Sir Galahad*?!”

But the voice did not answer her, drifting farther and farther away.

“To defeat them, you require the true king…and the bastard child of the devil—the sorcerer… Though it is a fine road, fine as silk… Our hope for salvation has not been dashed. So…please, Sir Kay…watch over their future…and please…protect them…”

Before she could respond, the voice completely disappeared.

To be honest, Sir Kay had no clue what the owner of the voice—Sir Galahad—was saying. She could not possibly decipher what the knight had been asking of her.

At least I know what I need to do!

Sir Kay didn’t hesitate as she reached her hand out to the sheathed sword floating in front of her eyes. If one was to use this sword without qualification, the blade would lead the wielder to tragic ruin. That had happened to Sir Balin. Even a hero hadn’t been able to avoid the curse.

I cannot fathom that I would be qualified…but regardless!

She grabbed the sword’s hilt.

“I’m not scared! If it is for Luna…and Rintarou’s sake! I am not afraid of the destruction that will eventually come down upon me!”

She pulled that sword from its sheath in one clean movement.

It really was a normal, unrefined sword with nothing out of the ordinary about it. Of course it would be. It was ill fit to be a sword. Obviously, there would be nothing out of the ordinary about it as a weapon.

As soon as she unsheathed it, a certain name bubbled up in her mind. Sir Kay chuckled at it unconsciously. She had been wondering what kind of fine name the sword might have… She realized the name itself had no ingenuity behind it.

In the darkness that could almost erase her existence, Sir Kay held the sword in both her hands and yelled its name as she swung it down.

“Lahat Chereb—the Flaming Sword!”

—

Suddenly, the concentrated darkness that had swallowed up and dropped down on Luna and Rintarou…was torn open, accompanied by a crimson gleam and a whirlwind of blazes.

“Gaaaaah!” Dark Nayuki let out a bloodcurdling screech.

“Luuuuuna!” A knight wielding a blazing sword jumped out from charred darkness.

“Sir Kay?!”

“Hyaaaaaah!” Swooping down from the sky, she swung Lahat Chereb. The crimson flame that swirled from the sword burned away the darkness that bound Luna.

“Gaaaah?! Th-that sword…?! How?! How would the weakest knight of the Round Table have the sword of the most virtuous knight*?! Impossible…! Aaaah!”*

The holy flame that rose from Lahat Chereb cleansed the world from the gloom.

“Luna! Do it now!” As she landed, Sir Kay pierced Lahat Chereb into the ground.

The flame that swirled around radiated along the ground, surrounding Luna and Rintarou. The darkness that attempted to encroach on them was cut off by the gleaming lines of fire.

“Wh-what happened to you, Sir Kay?! Where did you get that ability…?!”

“Luna! Unfortunately, Lahat Chereb doesn’t have the ability to attack! It can only show its power when it’s protecting something! Because of that, this is all I can do!”

“—Gh?!” Luna turned around.

Rintarou was there.

“Guh?!”

It might have been because the power of the darkness that had been leading Rintarou astray had been temporarily weakened, but…he was holding his head and backing away.

If she was going to take him back from the Holy Grail, now was the time.

“Rintaroooooooou!”

From within the sacred flame, Luna squeezed out her last bit of strength and charged at him.

At that moment, a voice came down between them.

—It’s no use… Now is the time for the King Arthur killer’s fate to be fulfilled.

—The time has come now. Kill her.

—Get her! Kill her! Slaughter her!

—Kill heeeeeeeer!

“I’ll kill youuuuuu!” Goaded by something’s will, Rintarou rushed at her. “Hyaaaaaaaah!”

“Gaaaack!”

There wasn’t much difference between them now.

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

But Rintarou was faster. Luna was one beat too slow.

At this rate, his attack would land just a second sooner than hers.

“Aaaaaaaah!” Rintarou drew his two swords behind him.

It was almost like a flash of light surged out as he thrust both swords. The tips of the swords pointed toward Luna—flying right at her heart from both sides.

It would be over.

Rintarou’s swords would tear Luna’s heart to shreds and everything would be over.

“Luuuunaaaa!”

It seemed that way.

Rintarou’s swords, which were driven forward by his desire to kill, stopped just short of stabbing through Luna’s chest.

“…That’s…?”

The tips of the swords pointed at the worn hawthorn cross hanging from Luna’s neck. The charm was glowing. That light pricked something inside Rintarou. As though he had come to his senses after seeing the fire, a light faintly returned to his eyes.

“I’ve…seen that…somewhere before…?”

At that moment, his memories returned.

Yeah, that's right. It happened when I was a kid.

The day had finally come when I would part ways with ▪▪▪▪ .

"Hey, ▪▪▪▪ … Here. For you."

"*Sniffle*…*hic*… What's that…?"

"This is a hawthorn Celtic cross. I made it by hand. It's a good luck charm."

"A handmade…charm…?"

"Japanese hawthorn has the potent power to connect people, and a Celtic cross represents power that'll never fade… What? Didn't you know?"

"*Hiccup*… How am I supposed to know that…? So? What about it…?"

"W-well…uh, basically, it's like a friendship charm or something…! It means let's meet again someday! I can't believe you made me say it out loud, you dummy!"

"…"

I brusquely pushed that charm on her.

▪▪▪▪ took it and just stared at it dumbly for a while. Eventually, even though her face was still wet with tears, she put on the cutest smile I'd seen. "Okay, thank you, Rintarou—I'll see you again someday!"

"See ya…*Luna*."

—

At that moment…a certain dark witch was muttering in marvel.

"…No way…? The course of fate…has changed…?"

In another place…

In dark shadows like the bottom of the sea, a certain boy muttered in delight. "Well, good show, partner… Though I'll say that was impressive, I'll pretend I didn't see all those lame parts… I've really got to hand it to your king from *this time* around."

KLIIIIIIIING!

"Huh?!"

Rintarou suddenly snapped back to his senses.

Luna swung up her sword and raised his swords sharply over his head. The full-scale impact made the two swords leave Rintarou's hands and whipped them around through the air.

Then, in the next moment…something struck his body.

Luna had hurled herself onto Rintarou to hug him.

"I win, Rintarou… My first win."

"Luna…"

For a while, Rintarou looked down at her as she firmly squeezed him. There was no madness in those eyes. They were back to normal, as though a weight had been lifted.

"…Right, Luna… You were the girl from *back then*…so that's how it was…"

"…Someone's slow."

Hot tears started to well up at the corners of Luna’s eyes as she hugged him.

“…You finally remembered…! Took you long enough…! You’re so thick in the head… Idiot…! You big dummy…!”

The world flooded with light. The real world that had been built through the netherworld collapsed, blazing white.

The two of them still hugged each other…

Sir Kay watched over them, moved to tears…

Their vision turned misty and brighter, until it was bleached pure white.

Everything turned pale…

FINAL CHAPTER

The Beginning of the End

The rolling waves rocked the room.

“…Uh, hng…?”

He realized they had been in the cabin of the boat from the very start of the journey.

Rintarou, Luna, and Sir Kay were lying on their beds.

“Uh… What was I just doing? I wasn’t absorbed, was I…?” Rintarou peeled himself off the bed, shaking his head.

“…You’re so annoying… After all that work you made us do…”

Luna lay on her bed with her head propped on her hand. She looked at Rintarou with a gaze that was almost tender.

“…This is…” Sir Kay looked at the thing in her hand.

It was the sword of the most virtuous knight, Lahat Chereb. Before going to sleep, Sir Kay found the sword under her sheets and leaned it against the wall. At some point, it made its way into her hand, and she had been holding the blade.

“…I see. So this sword had been trying to help us this whole time…”

While the three of them were absorbed by these revelations…

“…Congratulations. Your search for the Holy Grail was successful—an impressive achievement.”

Dindrane quietly stood in a corner of the cabin. Next to her was a person holding a cup that glittered gold. That figure looked like a nomad, clad in a cloak and hood. It was that person Sir Kay met at the village that had been overrun by the demon.

That figure gently tugged off their hood and exposed their form. Silver hair tumbled out. She wore a white surcoat and light, silver armor. A beautiful female knight with a slight otherworldliness about her.

“…Galahad?”

“…Yes, that’s right, Merlin.” She grinned at Rintarou’s question.

He grumbled, seeming sullen and sulky all of a sudden. “Seriously…that was a nasty trial… Telling its participants that they can’t desire the treasure…? To hell with that. Why else would we be involved in this quest?”

“But in the nightmare the Holy Grail showed you, you realized its true nature. You stopped seeking things from the chalice… You stopped focusing on your avarice. That is exactly why you were able to obtain it.”

Sir Galahad stepped in front of Luna and held the Holy Grail out to her.

“…Oh.” Luna took it.

Sir Galahad turned to Rintarou. “Merlin… No, Rintarou… You know what to do, don’t you?”

“…”

“Only imbue the Holy Grail with kindness for your precious friend. Not anything else. If you do that, the Holy Grail will answer you. As you are now…I’m certain you can do it.”

He stared at the Holy Grail in Luna’s hand.

“Rintarou…here.”

“…Yeah.” With no hesitation, he pulled a small leather bag from his pocket, opening the contents of it out into his palm.

It was Nayuki’s crystal.

“…Please. Give back…our friend, Nayuki!”

There was none of the fear that he’d locked away in his heart. Because of that, he could wish for just this one desire.

Though they were in the boat’s cabin, a blinding light came from the heavens and poured over their heads. The particles of light pooled over Nayuki’s crystal. Then, glowing incandescently, it floated into the air and mended. Eventually, the particles of mana that gathered in the middle of the core turned into the incarnation of a girl. The light faded, and the one who gently floated down and stood there was…

“H-huh…? Where am I…? Why am I here…? R-Rintarou…?”

Nayuki fluttered her eyelids, unable to piece together what had happened.

“N-Nayuki…! You little…!” Rintarou pulled her into a hug, unable to hold back his tears. “What do you think you were doing, you idiot…? You’ve always been stupid…even when you were Nimue…!”

“!” Nayuki’s eyes opened wide.

His words had triggered her into remembering everything.

“Uh, um…Rintarou…no, Merlin…I-I’m…”

“Shut up. It doesn’t matter. Everything is fine now… Don’t say anything. Just be quiet and stay with us…all right…?”

“…Okay, I understand… Thank you…hee-hee, it’s like a dream come true…” Nayuki was tearing up as Rintarou hugged her firmly.

Because of her resurrection, their memories returned.

“…Welcome back, Nayuki.” Luna wore an unusually kind expression as she patted Nayuki’s head.

“…” Sir Kay watched the three from a slight distance. Eventually, as though noticing something, she turned to Sir Galahad, holding out the sword of the most virtuous knight, Lahat Chereb.

“Sir Galahad…your assistance was of great help. This sword was originally yours. I am not fit to wield it… I will return it to you.”

Sir Galahad smiled, shaking her head. “No, it’s yours now. You were chosen by it. You chose the blade, and it chose you. Please use it.”

“Huh?! B-but I couldn’t possibly have such a powerful sword as this one!”

“I believe that starting now, you will all be involved in a large battle for the human world.”

“What does that mean…?”

“I’m sure you will know soon enough. Because that is how fate has been paved.”

“…”

“When the time comes, the power of the sword created to protect others…Lahat Chereb will most certainly become your strength.”

“Huh?! …I understand. I will use it gratefully.”

“Oh, but make sure you’re careful. That sword is cursed, after all. If you use it for your own benefit and hurt someone, you’ll end up fated for ruin and kill the person you love… Just like Sir Balin.”

“Whhhhhaaaaaaaaaat?! I’m scared!”

“I think you’ll probably be fine, since it’s you, Sir Kay. Heh-heh-heh…”

“‘Probably’…? Were you always so mischievous? I thought you were always more, well, emotionless and peerless in your nobility, and upstanding—a perfect human specimen…”

“Well, even I’m just a young, beautiful maiden at the tender age of seventeen. If I hadn’t ended up the way I did, I would have enjoyed my youth more like a normal person… It would have been nice to have at least fallen in love.”

“…I see. Of course. Even someone as saintly as you…is human, too.”

“I have no regrets about fulfilling my role, though… Now that I’ve come to this point, it’s not as though I could do anything about it anyway.”

While informing them with an amicable expression, Sir Galahad stepped toward Luna and humbly held out her hand.

“…Luna, the modern king chosen by the Holy Grail… Bestow upon me the Grail.”

“Oh, right. Sure.”

She had sought to become king with her own power from the start. She had no attachment to something like the Holy Grail. Luna easily handed the chalice over to Sir Galahad.

“I’m sure you already know, but…this Holy Grail has long since been tainted by the will of an evil god… It cannot remain in this world.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I will…return it to heaven,” Sir Galahad said without hesitation, without gloom. “I’m sure that is for the best. Because…this is my role.”

“Of course.” Rintarou nodded in agreement. “I kind of…don’t really get it, but it seems like we really owe you one.”

“It’s fine. I am sure I can leave the fate of this world to you, being who you are…I can leave without worry. Though I did want to see where your royal road would take you after you successfully obtained the Holy Grail—the very treasure King Arthur longed for but could never grasp… That will just not come true at this juncture.”

Sir Galahad held the Holy Grail and quietly closed her eyes. A blinding light poured over her head and engulfed her entire body.

As all of them watched, her form slowly faded as she floated into the sky, cocooned by light.

"…Good-bye, everyone. Good-bye…"

With a tranquil expression, Sir Galahad started to disappear…

She ascended.

They were all humbly witnessing her…

"HYAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" Luna catapulted off the ground and dropkicked the knight right back down.

"Eeep?!"

Blown out of range of the downpour of light, Sir Galahad immediately regained her physical form and crashed to the ground headfirst—right into the floor. After being thrown over, the Holy Grail bounced several times off the floor and miraculously landed upright.

They could almost hear crickets chirping.

The great knight who formerly accomplished this great quest was upside down, sticking straight out of the floor. They were all in silence for several seconds, gaping at the surreal scene.

"What do you think you're doooing?!" Rintarou howled, tears in his eyes as he grabbed Luna's collar.

This final memory of Sir Galahad was ruined—along with everything else.

Luna ignored Rintarou and barreled toward Sir Galahad.

"…Huh? Um…? Luna…?"

Sir Galahad pulled her head out from the floor and blinked up at her.

Luna zipped right up to Sir Galahad's face. "It's those selfless acts that leave a bad taste in my mouth. I guess you can call it martyrdom? Are you trying to say you don't care what happens to you as long as everyone else is fine and dandy? …Hmph!"

"Oh, no, well…it's not about whether anyone likes it or not…"

"Point is, I don't like a whole tragic heroine act standing out more than me."

"*That's* what motivates you?!"

"Well, if you would have been some broken savior—without a single doubt or hesitation left in you… I would have let you go! But you were kind of normal and seemed like you've just been holding back, and that irritates me even more!" Luna grabbed Sir Galahad's collar.

"You know what? I hate it when people deliver lines like 'You'll know when the time is right' or…'Now isn't the time to talk about it'…and stuff! I hate that holier-than-thou, I-know-more-than-you attitude! Just spit it out already! If you're not going to explain yourself, then don't bring it up in the first place—" She stood Sir Galahad upright and pointed a finger right at her. "Come with me. Become my vassal. Got it?"

“W-wait! I’m already dead! I have physical form because this is a netherworld! Outside, I wouldn’t even have flesh…!”

That was when…

Rattle! Rattle, rattle, rattle, rattle… A sound started coming from the Holy Grail on the ground.

“Huh? What was that just now…?”

Dindrane swiftly picked up that Holy Grail and tilted it. Something rolled out of the chalice and dropped into her palm.

“…Ha-ha, Sir Galahad… It seems it is the Holy Grail’s will.” Dindrane quietly handed the thing to Luna.

What she handed to Luna was a piece of stone with XIII engraved in it.

“A Round Fragment?! And it’s the perilous thirteenth seat to boot—Sir Galahad’s!”

“I-is that for real…?” Sir Galahad asked in a daze.

“As long as you have this, you can stick around in the physical world like Sir Kay and Sir Gawain… Heh-heh-heh. Well, that settles it.” Toying with Sir Galahad’s Round Fragment, Luna grinned insolently as though this was it.

“That’s absurd… There’s no way…? Is this actually possible?” Rintarou held his head and staggered at the unexpected development.

“But…you’re here too, Rintarou, because Luna is the way she is…and she saved me…”

Nayuki smiled gently next to him.

“Yes, I want to protect her because she’s Luna.” Sir Kay gripped the flaming sword. “…In which case, I should return this sword to you.”

“No need, Sir Kay. That sword did decide to tie its fate to you. I’m no longer its owner.”

“But…”

“It’ll be fine. I have tons of relics that are just as good or even better.”

“You little hack,” Sir Kay spat, automatically disgusted.

Once again, Sir Galahad turned to face them all. “Anyway…I got it. For the time being, let’s get back to the real world and settle down. Then I’ll tell you about the secrets surrounding the Holy Grail, what I saw in my past quest for it…and the danger that currently is approaching the world.

“Before we do that, we need to deal with that dangerous chalice… It wouldn’t be good to bring this thing home to the real world. Unfortunately, the real world isn’t filled with noble people like you. The Holy Grail would churn out desires, and the world would be in chaos.”

“In that case, how about I take it back to heaven?” Dindrane volunteered, holy cup in her hands.

“…Are you sure?”

“Yes. Unlike the Jacks or Nayuki, I have passed on in the past with no connections to this world. Even the Holy Grail’s power cannot bring back the dead. All I have done is come to this world temporarily through the ceremony of the King Arthur Succession Battle…”

It seemed that was the only way to do it.

“Thanks. If you could… We’d owe you one.”

“…Yes. May luck be on your side in the upcoming fight…”

Dindrane looked at all of them and smiled faintly.

Right at that moment…

—

In a certain place…

“I see. I don’t know what kind of miracle has occurred, but…I was surprised they skirted the fate of the assassin who killed King Arthur.”

The dark witch laughed.

“But this is no issue. Fate is in my hands.”

—

“Aaaaaaaaaah?!” Dindrane let out a shrill scream.

“Wha—?”

They all opened their eyes wide and froze.

Her chest had been ripped open, gushing blood and sinew… A woman’s arm was growing out of it, grabbing the Holy Grail in Dindrane’s hands.

“Found it…! Finally…finally…!”

“*Cough…* No…! Not like this…! St-stop…!”

Fwoosh! Dindrane’s body instantly turned into particles of light and scattered into the air. Condensing again, they reconstructed into the form of a new woman.

The one who appeared was…

“—Vivian?!”

It was Vivian, holding the Holy Grail firmly in both her hands.

“I did it… I did it…?! Finally! Finally, I hold the Holy Grail in my hands… I thought it was impossible for someone who isn’t fully human to hold this goblet…but…I did it…!” With a smile filled with madness, Vivian sounded as though she had triumphed. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What do you think?! Merlin! How do you feel being outwitted by an insignificant woman you belittled and treated as a fool?!”

“Huh?!”

“I thought you would definitely die in this quest! But I made an arrangement on the off chance that you completed this trial! I never thought it would have happened! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! It would have been the ultimate revenge if I had actually done this to Nimue’s crystal rather than Dindrane! Unfortunately, I had to make her a sacrifice! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, she was already dead to start and served her purpose… I’ll just say it was worth it to see your stupid expressions. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Vivian wasn’t in her right mind. It seemed she had already been affected by the Holy Grail’s devilishness.

“Why, you…!”

“…How vulgar…”

Rintarou readied his swords, and Luna steadied her Excalibur next to him. Nayuki prepared her ice magic and Sir Kay gripped her Lahat Chereb.

Sir Galahad was armed with a white sword and shield and a spear that she had pulled out of nowhere.

It was five against one.

Everyone on Rintarou's side was a powerful warrior.

Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't even be a fight.

However…

"Heh-heh-heh… As long as I have this Holy Grail, I can get anything…I don't need to wait for the Catastrophe or King Arthur's second coming! I don't need to control the world in secret anymore from the underworld…! I —and I alone—will be able to rule this world for eternity…! Forever…!"

Vivian held up the Holy Grail.

In the next moment, condensed darkness flooded out of it.

In a second, it corrupted its surroundings and wiped them out.

FWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOSHT!

At the sound of crashing waves, they were dragged into the bottom of a deep ocean created by the void.

"—Mrph?!"

The water pressure was starting to crush them. The extremely low temperature of the water was chilling them to the core. They were suffocating.

"Yes… I have no need for a king anymore… No need for Merlin… I will kill you all… Yes, this world is mine! It's not meant to be controlled by humans…! It's the world of the gods! Give it back… Give it back!"

Then, Vivian's body transformed before their eyes into a singular eyeball —an evil god as mighty as a giant.

"Balor of the Evil Eye!" Sir Galahad called out its name.

"…The leader of the Fomorians…? It couldn't be that the evil possessing the Holy Grail was…"

"Bingo, Sir Kay! Well, that's just a single part of Balor's incarnation… It's not his main host…but if he can so clearly manifest himself in a netherworld…?! Gah?!" Sir Galahad was speaking to Luna, frightened. "Hurry! Let's return to the real world! It might be in a dire state right now!"

"Okay…but my body feels like a lump of coal… I can't really move…!" Luna struggled desperately, glugging as she sank toward the bottom of the deep ocean.

This was Fomorian territory. It was their domain.

It would make anyone incredibly weak.

"Perish, you fragile beings!"

Vivian—Balor's avatar—raised a stout arm and brought it down toward them.

"Huh?!"

None of them could move—Luna, Sir Kay, nor Nayuki. They were captured in enemy territory, frozen in place.

Only two of them…

"Hraaah!"

Rintarou…

"…Hwah!"

…and Sir Galahad were exceptions.

Rintarou had undergone his *Fomorian Transformation*, moving through the water like a shark, slashing at the giant arm with his swords. He brought them up into an X and sent the arm flying.

In that moment, Sir Galahad swung her glowing blade and spear to form a cross, blasting away its body.

Rintarou's shadow Aura and Sir Galahad's light Aura caused a giant explosion.

"Gwaaaah?!"

Balor comically propelled through the water, sent flying far off…

"Heh! This was Fomorian territory? That makes this my home ground, doesn't it?" Rintarou stood to protect Luna and the others.

"Well, I'm a saint of saints after all… Darkness isn't a big deal." Sir Galahad proudly shouldered her spear.

"Oh, so you can bring it. The true Lance of Longinus, David's Sword, Joseph of Arimathea's Shield… You're going strong with all those overpowered artifacts."

"Yeah, but…" Sir Galahad was cautious of her surroundings, readying her glittering sword. "It's coming… It's not just Balor's avatar. Sea demons are approaching us and forming a giant group to eat us up."

That was certainly the case.

A group of repulsive monsters of unparalleled evil were approaching from all sides of the ocean's darkness. The horde's presence was enough to make their skin crawl.

Through the sea, they heard the sound of teeth clicking, claws scraping, tentacles writhing, and unknown organs rising and grinding with unpleasant noises.

Then, there were Balor's attacks, which made the rest of the horde seem soft.

They could tell that, at that moment, the horde was coming in at terrific speeds.

"What shall we do, Rintarou? This battleground doesn't work to our advantage. It will be hard to protect those who cannot fight, even for us…," Sir Galahad observed.

Rintarou made a quick decision. "Luna! Leave this to me! You all get out of here first!"

"R-Rintarou?!" Luna was taken aback.

"Heh! All I did this time around was show my pathetic side, right?! I've got to make up for that now! Hurry! Sir Kay's flaming sword should be able to cut open a road to the real world!"

"B-but…"

“Did you forget? I’m Merlin. I can hack my way out of any situation and, with Merlin’s magic, I’ll figure out a way back! So let me be the anchorman!”

Even as they were talking…Balor’s avatar and the sea demon horde drew closer…

“Sir Galahad…you’ll protect Luna and the others on the way home, right?”

“…Of course. I am Luna’s Jack now, after all.”

“I leave it to you.”

While Rintarou and Sir Galahad were having that exchange…

“Gaaaaaaaaah!”

Balor’s avatar created a terrific torrent of water and appeared in front of him.

Grotesque sea demons surrounded Luna and the others and started to attack.

“Hyah!”

However, Sir Galahad swung her holy sword and spear, which created a whirling tide and systematically cut down the sea demons, piercing them, mowing them down. They were practically driven away in one blow.

Then, Rintarou and Balor clashed.

When his two swords and Balor’s fists collided, it was clear this battle was in a different league. It was already at a point that the others couldn’t offer any help, since they were weakened by the domain of darkness.

“R-Rintarou?!”

“You can’t, Luna! You’ll get in the way!”

“I understand your feelings, but…all we can do now is what Rintarou has said… We can’t do anything… All we’ll do is drag him down…”

Sir Kay and Nayuki’s faces seemed bitter.

For a while, Luna looked at her friends and then at Rintarou’s back. “Rintarou!” she yelled. “You’re going to make sure you come home, right?! To me! You’re going to come home, right?!”

“’Course I am! I’m the world’s greatest vassal to the world’s best king!”

That was enough for her.

“…Sir Kay!”

“Yes! Lahat Chereb!” Sir Kay waved her sword.

The fire glittered as it whirled, creating a vortex from a fierce blaze.

Lahat Chereb wasn’t a sword meant to defeat anyone—it was a sword of protection. As long as it was used *just* for that, it would draw on the wielder’s wishes and display almighty powers. At that moment, Lahat Chereb tore through the darkness of the deep ocean and created a single road of light to the real world.

“Gah?! This is heavy?! …Please follow after me! I will most certainly lead everyone to the real world…!” Sir Kay left first.

“Gotta hand it to Sir Kay. You’ve already mastered Lahat Chereb more than I had. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so unfaithful with so many other

weapons? Ahh, I suppose I'm just too saintly…" Sir Galahad continued after Sir Kay while cutting down the approaching monster horde at random. She was batting them away like she was swatting flies.

"Rintarou! Thank you! Make sure you come home! I'll be waiting! I'll wait for you…!" Nayuki left, crying.

"…" Luna could no longer say anything and turned around wordlessly. She simply squeezed the hawthorn cross hanging around her neck.

"…Yeah, I'll come home."

While swinging his swords, Rintarou continued to heroically fight Balor's avatar.

Of course, he wore the hawthorn cross on his chest—the one that matched Luna's.

"Why? Why…?!"

Balor's avatar looked down at Rintarou with his giant, swiveling eyeball.

"Why do you disobey me, my son…?! Why won't you kill King Arthur?! I created you to carry that out… Why do you do this?! Why?!"

"Shut up! I don't understand what's going on, but don't come out of nowhere acting like my dad!" Rintarou howled while knocking back Balor's great arm with his swords. "You want to know why I'm disobeying you?! That's obvious! Unlike your ugly mug, she's a million times cuter and more entertaining!"

By themselves at the bottom of the deep ocean of darkness…the battle to the death between Rintarou and the repugnant embodiment of malice unfolded.

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's Taro Hitsuji.

We've gotten to publish the fourth volume of Last Round Arthurs.

I am eternally grateful to those who were involved in the editing and publication of this book, as well as readers who picked it up. Thank you so much!

So it's finally the fourth volume.

I think it marks a turning point, where all the foreshadowing has led up to, and now, we're starting to head toward the conclusion.

I've been balancing this book and the manuscript for *Akashic Records*, which was kind of sprung on me, so I want to give myself a pat on the back.

By the way, are you aware of the phenomenon where "characters have a mind of their own?" For authors and other creatives, this phenomenon is handed down almost as though it's an urban legend.

Before we start writing, professional writers pour our blood and sweat into constructing a plot that acts as a blueprint, which we try to adhere to. The characters in the story conduct themselves and speak their lines to align with the plot.

When a "character had a mind of their own," they go beyond the plot and start spitting out dialogue outside of the expectations. In other words, through the developments that have built up until that point, the character has life breathed into them. You could even say it's the moment they start coming alive…

…Now that I'm listening to myself, it sounds like a good thing, but…

It means trouble. Big time.

Well, I mean, a plot can be compared to a work proposal or a task management chart. In accordance with the plot, the author, editorial department, illustrator, and printer all work together to make a novel.

Though people are inclined to get the wrong impression about this, writing a novel isn't a one-man job. It's a team enterprise where an author, an editor, an illustrator, a printing company, and all other relevant parties involved combine their abilities. Making illustrations, getting things together, thinking up a PR strategy, setting up distribution, organizing events, printing… It's a job that an author cannot possibly do alone.

When the author says "the character is starting to have a mind of its own" with a dopey grin and starts doing whatever they want, everyone is in trouble.

Are you listening, Luna Artur? I mean you! That's right! You over there.

Well, you're the one writing, Hitsuji! Well, yeah, but…!

All of the blame is mine!

Aaaaah! Luna is so stubborn as a heroine! Uuuuugh! I'll give Rintarou a free pass. She actually bares her fangs at me!

…The fourth volume was chaotic for many reasons (mainly for me). I'd be pleased if you found some enjoyment out of this book. Thank you very much.

Taro Hitsuji

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